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***What Contemporary Jewish Communities Learn
About Caring
for Those Who Suffer from Infertility
from Biblical and Midrashic
Literature***

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Table of Contents

Introduction:	Page 3
Chapter One: <i>Genesis Stories and Mikraot Gedolot: Setting the Scene</i>	Page 8
Chapter Two: <i>Rabbinic Insights on a Biblical and Modern Struggle</i>	Page 25
Chapter Three: <i>Contemporary Sources on Infertility</i>	Page 51
Conclusion: <i>How our Texts Have the Power to Heal</i>	Page 70
Bibliography:	Page 73

Introduction

In the very beginning, in the first book of the Torah, in chapter 1 verse 22, we read the first commandment God spoke to human beings, פרו ורב be fruitful and multiply. Six short verses later we read this commandment again. What did “be fruitful and multiply,” mean to Adam and Eve at the beginning of time, and how did this commandment inform the relationships between men and women throughout the book of Genesis and in the first chapter of Samuel? We will begin to understand the magnitude and effect of this commandment on Sarai, Rachel, Leah, Rebekah and Hannah as we explore Genesis Chapters 16, 25, 29, 30 and Samuel 1 chapters 1 and 2. We will delve into the perspectives of these women as well as the experiences of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Hannah’s husband, Elkanah, when they were unable to fulfill the commandment פרו ורב.

Our story begins with creation and continues with God’s first conversation with our forefather Abram. In Genesis chapter 11 in *Parashat Noah*, after ten generations have passed since Adam and Eve, we meet Abram (later re-named Abraham) and his wife Sarai (later renamed Sarah). Immediately we learn that Sarai is barren. “Then Abram and Nahor took wives: Abram’s wife was named Sarai...And Sarai was barren; she had no offspring.”¹ A new beginning for the Jewish people is coupled with barrenness.

The following *Parashah Lech Lecha*, begins with a covenant between Abram and God. God promises to make a great nation for Abram. In chapter 13 we read again God’s promise to Abram that he will have progeny, “I will make your descendants like the dust

¹ Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Ed., Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, Ph.D., Associate Ed., The Torah, A Women’s Commentary, (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008). All biblical citations come from this source, unless otherwise noted.

of the earth. Only if one can count the dust of the earth will it be possible to count your descendants.” And finally in Genesis 15 Abram questions God’s promise of progeny God replies, “Turn your gaze towards the heavens and count the stars, if you can count them! So shall be your seed.” God’s promise to Abram becomes engrained in the Jewish community for generations.

We expect to be able to live out the commandment פרו ורבו yet we rarely recognize the numerous factors out of our control that determine our ability to reproduce. Having children is a given, and barrenness is the anomaly despite the fact that every one of our foremothers struggled with being barren at some point in her life. These verses set the scene for our cultural understanding that as Jews, we are part of a family tree that is eternally reproducing. If we are unable to have children we are letting down an entire people by breaking the chain of fertility.

Historically the commandment פרו ורבו went hand in hand with God’s consideration that, “It is not good that the man be alone-I will make him a helpmate.” Legal codes all conclude that marriage is a *mitzvah*. In R. Jacob ben Asher’s code, the *Tur*,² in *Even HaEzer*, the section devoted to marriage laws, begins by explaining, “Blessed is God who...made him (man) a helpmate. Furthermore creation’s purpose in man is that he reproduce himself, which is impossible without a helpmate.”³ When one found a partner but was unable to procreate two *mitzvot* collided causing Rabbinic authorities to offer decisions about which *mitzvah* to preference. The Bible provided the Rabbis with

² The *Tur* was created in the fourteenth century by R. Jacob ben Asher (Cologne, 1270 - Toledo c.1340). *Arba'ah Turim*, often called simply the *Tur*, is an important *Halakhic* code. The four-part structure of the *Tur* and its division into chapters (*simanim*) were adopted by the later code *Shulchan Aruch*. This and other informational footnotes about classical Jewish literature comes from the Encyclopedia Judaica, CD ROM Edition, 1997.

³ *Tur Even HaEzer*, Par. 1.

examples of polygamous marriages. But the Rabbis did not conclude their search for an answer to this dilemma there. The Rabbis used biblical stories to debate how long a couple should remain together before a husband is allowed to divorce his wife in order to remarry and procreate. Polygamy, historically accepted by many Jewish communities, over time was banned, but surrogacy, in-vitro fertilization, adoption and other methods to create a family, still provide modern day rabbis with complicated legal issues to consider within a Jewish context. Jewish law influences many couples within the Jewish community, but for others, social pressures and cultural expectations weigh heavily on them instead.

In contemporary times the Jewish community continues to place a great deal of pressure on each generation to add to the Jewish population. The Holocaust adds a layer of obligation that is compounded today by current statistics about intermarriage and the Jewish institutional focus on continuity. Despite the cultural desire to increase the Jewish population for the future of the Jewish people, more Jewish women are finding themselves dealing with infertility in the 21st century than ever before.

Infertility has become a prevalent issue in American society as well as the Jewish community in particular. Statistics from the National Center of Disease Control and Prevention state that “10% of women (6.1 million) in the United States aged 15-44 years have difficulty getting pregnant or staying pregnant.”⁴ In the Jewish community infertility rates are believed to be even higher.⁵ Sociologists who study the Jewish community provide us with various explanations for the high fertility rates particularly in the Jewish

⁴<http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/Infertility/index.htm> last updated June 28, 2011

⁵ http://www.jccany.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ametz_meetingtheneedsofjewishadoptivefamilies

community. In “*Jews and the Jewish Birthrate*”⁶ Jack Wertheimer points out that, “Jews marry later than other Americans...Economic advancement, the availability of birth control, and rising educational achievement caused Jewish fertility to start dropping as long ago as the 19th century in Europe and later in other modernizing societies like the United States....Jewish women in the United States are significantly less fertile than their Gentile counterparts.”⁷ Despite a desire to create a Jewish family, Jewish women today also aspire to complete higher education, shatter the glass ceilings that still exist in multiple professions and live in households where they are not solely responsible for raising children and taking care of the home. Demographer Frank Mott explains, “For many of them, (Jewish women who spend years in higher education) still more childless years follow as they work to advance their careers.”⁸

As infertility continues to significantly affect the Jewish community, the perception may be that our communities and text have nothing to offer individuals and couples struggling. Depression and experiences of trauma are common with these couples and for some, the synagogue is the last place they think to turn to for support.⁹ Our texts and commentary provide us with a tremendous amount to offer individuals and couples. They provide multiple points of entry into the discussions surrounding infertility. Models of partners supporting one another, individuals finding strength from God and prayer as well as resilience in themselves and barren women engaged in emotional struggles, all exist within our sacred text.

⁶ <http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/17042.pdf>

⁷ Jack Wertheimer, “Jews and the Jewish Birthrate,” *Commentary*: 120, 3, (Oct 2005); Research Library Core: 40.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family and Social Perspectives* (3rd Edition), (Allyn and Bacon: MA, 2005), 259.

This thesis will examine a variety of sources in order to understand the ways in which our foremothers struggled with infertility while shedding light on how their lives mirror the lives of women today. We will begin with the biblical stories and commentators, and continue with *midrashic* sources and contemporary literature concerning infertility. To conclude, suggestions for ways in which to use these sources in counseling sessions, support groups, sermons and adult learning classes will be addressed.

Chapter One

Genesis Stories and *Mikraot Gedolot*: Setting the Scene

Genesis 16: Sarai and Abram

The story of Sarai, Abram and Hagar is perhaps the first story that comes to mind when one thinks of barren biblical women and their emotional struggles and experiences. Sarai's desires and struggles mirror those of women dealing with infertility today. In Genesis chapter 11, verses 29-30 we are introduced to Sarai. Verse 30 explains, 'ותה' שר' עקרה *And Sarai was barren*. This defining description of Sarai continues throughout her narrative, describing her as if barrenness is her last name. To begin chapter 16 in verse 1 we find a similar description, “*Now Abram's wife Sarai, לא 'לדה לו who had not borne him a child...*” The description of Sarai in verse 1 transforms in verse 2 from a barren woman to a woman who takes her destiny into her own hands. Sarai instructs Abram to have intercourse with her slave in order for Sarai to have a son through Hagar. Rashi¹⁰ comments on verse 2 by explaining, “If you are not built through sons you are destroyed.” Rashi's understanding that barrenness is equal to being destroyed is a theme that repeats in the rabbinic commentary on barren women.

An essential component of verse 2 is Sarai's insistence that ה'הוה has kept her from having children. “So Sarai said to Abram: ‘Seeing as ה'הוה has kept me from bearing a child, have intercourse with my slave: maybe I will have a son through her.’ Abraham

¹⁰ Rashi: Solomon ben Isaac; 1040–1105, a leading commentator on the Bible and Talmud in France. The main distinguishing characteristic of Rashi's commentary is a compromise between the literal and the midrashic interpretations; to the latter, which was the principal method of exposition in French biblical exegesis, he added the former. At least three-quarters of Rashi's comments are based on rabbinic sources. The commentators' biographical information throughout this chapter comes from the Encyclopedia Judaica, CD ROM Edition, 1997.

heeded Sarai's voice." Sarai acknowledges that her ability to have a son is controlled by God, yet she takes her situation into her own hands. Sarai is clearly a strong willed woman. Sarai's determination is extraordinary given the fact Abram has yet to share with her that ה' promised him progeny. Sarai offers Hagar without any hesitation, but once Hagar conceives after one night with Abram, Sarai's jealousy gets the best of her. Chapter 16 illustrates how using Hagar as a surrogate complicates the relationships between Sarai, Hagar and Abram. When Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarai's feelings about the situation change. As Rashi explains, Hagar got pregnant the first time. This fact was viewed as proof by the individuals involved as well as the commentators that Abram was fertile and Sarai was not.

Until now, Abram's role is ambiguous. According to Ramban¹¹, Abram longs for children but he does not act on this longing until he sees Sarai and Hagar together. Ramban explains that Abram asks Sarai for her permission to have a child with Hagar. Abram does not recognize the children he will have with Hagar as his own seed, and his children. Ramban writes that Abram lays with Hagar in order to build up Sarai and to quiet Sarai's spirit. Ramban's commentary illustrates Abram's concern for Sarai's emotional well-being, Abram wants to provide for Sarai.

In verse 3 we gather specific information about the length of time Sarai and Abram have waited until they explored other options to become parents. "Ten years after Abram had settled in the land of Canaan...Sarai took her slave Hagar the Egyptian and

¹¹ Ramban: Nahmanides, also known as Nahamani and RaMBaN—an acronym of Rabbi Moses Ben Nahman; 1194–1270, Spanish rabbi and scholar and one of the leading authors of talmudic literature in the Middle Ages; philosopher, kabbalist, biblical exegete, poet, and physician. Nahmanides, though he followed strict philological procedure when he deemed it necessary to establish the exact meaning of a word, concerns himself mainly with the sequence of the biblical passages and with the deeper meaning of the Bible's laws and narrative

gave her to her husband Abram as a wife” Rashi explains that this verse is the basis for the law; if after ten years a couple has not been able to reproduce the husband is allowed to marry another wife. Rashi also conjectures that this may be why Sarai proposes a solution to her barrenness at this point in the narrative. Torah Temimah¹² offers another explanation for Sarah’s barrenness. Until Abram was settled in the land where he was supposed to be, Abram and his wife would remain childless.

In reference to verse 5, the Rabbis explain how the tension between Abram and Sarai grows even when they have found a solution. Rashi comments on Sarai’s words to Abram, “My wrong is on your head! I put my slave in your arms; no sooner did she see that she was pregnant, I became for her an object of scorn.” Rashi explains that Sarai is articulating that Abram prayed to God for himself, not for her. Abram is responsible for Sarai being barren because Abram asked God what God would give him, not “us” in Genesis 15:2.

Rashi’s commentary continues as he explains the power of Sarai’s words. When Sarai exclaims at the end of verse 5, “Let הויה judge between us!” she brings in the evil eye and Hagar loses her first pregnancy. Sarai’s words, as we will see for many of our foremothers, are powerful. After Abram tells Sarai to do with Hagar as she wishes, Sarai afflicts Hagar out of jealousy and pain. Ibn Ezra¹³ and Ramban think that both Sarai and Abram are at fault for the way in which they respond to this challenging situation. Maybe

¹² Torah Temimah: Epstein, Baruch Ha-Levi , 1860–1942, Russian talmudic scholar. Born in Bobruisk he wrote a compilation of quotations from the oral law arranged according to the scriptural verses to which they refer and annotated by a brilliant commentary that attests to his vast and profound knowledge of Talmud.

¹³ Ibn Ezra: Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1089–1164, poet, grammarian, biblical commentator, philosopher, astronomer, and physician. Ibn Ezra was born in Tudela, Spain. Ibn Ezra began his exegetical activity in Rome in 1140, and continued in it during the more than two decades of his wanderings. Etymological and grammatical explanations are major features of Ibn Ezra's commentary.

Abram knew how distressed Sarai was and he didn't want to decide what should be done because he didn't want to upset her even more. Sarai is feeling powerless; Abram may be trying to give her back some power in the situation. These verses bring up the realities of how humans respond when we are frustrated. Our anger is often misplaced especially when a couple is feeling unable to deal with the depth of their emotions.

In verse 6, the verb *ענה* *afflicted* is used; it is the same verb used to describe the treatment of the Israelites in Egypt. (Exodus 1:11) One moment Sarai treats Hagar as the woman who could provide for her, and the next moment she treats her as a slave. This change reflects the emotionally charged experience for Sarai, of using a surrogate.

Ramban comments that our mother Sarai sinned with this abuse of Hagar. Abram also sinned in permitting Sarai to abuse Hagar. By relinquishing responsibility for responding to the tension between the two women, Abram, according to Ramban, is seen as committing a sin. *יהוה* gives Hagar a son in response to Abram's sin.

After Hagar runs away, an angel of God hears Hagar crying out in the wilderness and tells her she should return to Sarai, Hagar is pregnant and will have a son who she should name Ishmael. The angel of God also tells Hagar that, "I will greatly multiply your descendants; they shall be too numerous to count." Once again we recognize God's role as the one who promises progeny and is in control of the womb. Our foremothers and Hagar respond to God with respect, prayers and pleas to God. In Hagar's situation, God's promise provides her with hope and comfort.

In this story Abram does not take a very active role in communicating with God for Sarai. Ramban acknowledges that since the promise to have children is universalized, one can only wait a certain amount of time before actualizing this promise. Ramban

applies later rabbinic law to Abram's decision when he agrees with Sarai.¹⁴ Since this is incumbent on all men, Abram followed Sarai's lead without any hesitation. Previously Abram asked God why God had not given him children. Abram does not question Sarai's solution but he also does nothing to facilitate any healthy communication between Hagar and Sarai.

The themes that arise from Genesis chapter sixteen are universal for women throughout time who have searched for and continue to seek out a solution to their barrenness. The questions that chapter 16 evoke include; how do women's relationships change when one woman is faced with infertility? How do couples relate to one another while they are searching for a solution? How is surrogacy an answer for many while it also causes emotional turmoil for others? When God promised Hagar that she would have many descendants she was comforted, what promises or signs comfort us today? The terseness of the text does not answer these questions for us, but one could find comfort that our foremothers and forefathers experience of child bearing was just an emotionally laden as it is in our world today.

Genesis 25: Rebekah and Isaac

Isaac and Rebekah are the great love story of the bible. We read in Genesis chapter 24 verse 67, "And Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah; he took Rebekah, and she became his wife and he loved her. Thus did Isaac take comfort after [the death of] his mother." In The Torah, A Women's Commentary we read that this is the first time in the Torah that we read about a man's love for a woman. While Rebekah's

¹⁴ Talmud Bavli, Y'vamos, 63b; Gen. Rabbah 34,20, Talmudic commentary on the importance of the duty of procreation for men. By Ramban's time the duty to procreate was *halacha*, Jewish Law, elucidated in the Talmud.

feelings for Isaac are not apparent in chapter 24, Isaac's devotion to Rebekah and their future family are apparent in chapter 25 as Isaac prays to God for his wife's fertility. As we will see in our exploration of chapter 25, both Isaac and Rebekah recognize and respect God's role in their ability to have children.

Chapter 25 begins with the description of the line of Abraham and we learn about his second wife Keturah. Abraham dies in verse 7 and in verse 11 Isaac is blessed by God after Abraham's death. A note in the Torah, A Women's Commentary teaches us that Rebekah's role in replacing Sarah is proven by the fact that Isaac is given all that Abraham owns after his death.¹⁵ This note leads us to ask if Rebekah's barrenness is a reflection of Sarah's inability to have children? Must all of our foremothers endure the pain of childlessness as a sign of their role in our sacred tradition?

In Genesis chapter 25 verse 21, at the beginning of *Parashat Toldot*, we read, "Isaac pleaded with יהוה on behalf of his wife, for she was childless (עקרה), and יהוה acceded to his entreaty, so his wife Rebekah became pregnant." Rashi explains that the word ויעתר *pleaded* implies that Isaac had an urgent need to pray, it was a powerful yearning for him. Rashi further explains that every time עתר is used in the bible it shows a powerful urgent need. Moses pleads with God on behalf of Pharaoh and the Egyptians in Exodus 8:26, and again Pharaoh tells Moses to plead with God in Exodus 9:28. In both verses, the root עתר is used.

Rashi interprets the words, "on behalf of his wife" as *in the sight of Rebekah*. This interpretation implies that both Isaac and Rebekah were standing together while he prayed, they were aware of one another. One may ask, why is Rebekah not praying?

¹⁵ The Torah, A Women's Commentary, 124.

Rashi continues by explaining that God's response of making Rebekah pregnant was based on the fact that Isaac's father was a *tzaddik*. Rashi explains that God responded differently to requests from *tzaddikim* than to requests from others. If Rebekah had prayed, God would not have responded in the same way since she was the daughter of Laban. God would not have spoken directly to Rebekah because of her lineage.

In verse 22 we learn that Rebekah is pregnant with twins. Ramban and Ibn Ezra debate the meaning of verse 22. "The children pressed against each other inside her. She thought: 'If this is so, why do I exist?' So she went to inquire of ה'." Ibn Ezra suggests that Rebekah asked the other women if they experienced great pain and comparing her pregnancy to theirs she asks, "Why is *my* pregnancy like this?" Ramban compares Rebekah to Job by interpreting her question to mean, "If only I would not be alive!" These vastly differing interpretations point to our Rabbis' inability to understand the experience of a woman who is experiencing the physical effects of carrying twins. God's response, explaining that two nations are within her womb, confirms yet another interpretation of her question found in The Torah, A Women's Commentary. "...the text mentions only that the pregnancy is unsettling, not that it is painful. Instead what prompts her question may be the prospect of multiple children, which in the Bible typically signals a special destiny. Far from complaining about her condition, Rebekah is wondering about her role in such destiny."¹⁶ This final interpretation shows God's understanding that what Rebekah is asking is about her destiny, rather than about her physical discomfort. It is noteworthy that Rebekah looks to God for answers about her pain rather than looking to her husband Isaac. Ramban interprets God's response as

¹⁶ *ibid*, 136.

saying, “There are two nations in your womb and they are already fighting with one another.”

There are many questions that arise from this two-verse snapshot of Rebekah and Isaac’s experience of barrenness. What do God and society expect of a couple that has experienced challenges conceiving and, furthermore, questions their experience of pregnancy? Are women like Rebekah allowed to share their concerns and fear with others, or are her questions concerning her pain and her destiny culturally unacceptable? Where can one find comfort when loved ones or even medical professionals are unable to answer their concerns? When and how can one find comfort in God during a difficult pregnancy? In just two short verses, various enduring struggles of women through the ages are identified.

Genesis 29: Rachel, Leah and Jacob

The love triangle that ensues in Genesis 29 between Jacob, Rachel and Leah provides the reader with a unique perspective on biblical relationships. In verse 10 we learn of Jacob’s infatuation with Rachel. Rachel’s father Laban is thrilled about Jacob’s arrival until the day comes when he must give her away. After working for Laban for seven years, Laban hosts a festive occasion to celebrate the marriage, but he gives Leah, his oldest daughter to Jacob, instead of Rachel the one who Jacob loves. After another seven years of labor, Laban gives Jacob his second daughter Rachel to Jacob, as a wife as well. Each time Laban gives Jacob one of his daughters, he also gives the daughter a maidservant.

The narrative continues by emphasizing Jacob’s love for Rachel in verse 30. “Jacob made love with Rachel, too; he loved Rachel-for whom he had served [Laban] yet

another seven years-so much more than Leah.” Ramban comments on this verse, highlighting the fact that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. This verse clearly states that Jacob prefers Rachel to Leah, setting up an apparent situation of sibling rivalry. This rivalry transforms the chapter from a narrative about relationships to a race from barrenness to fertility.

In verse 31 we read, “Now, seeing that Leah was disfavored, *יהוה* opened her womb, while Rachel was childless.” Ramban comments that *שנואה*, disfavored, is a term used when one wife is beloved and the other is the hated one. Radak¹⁷ offers a different interpretation, he explains that Jacob did not hate Leah, he simply loved Rachel more than Leah. In this verse we recognize God’s control over the womb. Verse 31 begins a series of verses transitioning into the following chapter in which Leah and Rachel bear multiple children. Leah names her sons based on God *seeing* her plight, *hearing* that she is despised, and fulfilling her desire for which she gives *thanks* to God. Leah also names one of her sons Levi, a pun on “accompany” as she feels as though Jacob will now be attached to her. These names are based on Leah’s relationship with God and Jacob, as well as the emotions her sons’ births evoke in her.

In chapter 30 verse 1 Rachel exclaims, “Let me have children; *ואם א'ן* (if nothing/emptiness) otherwise I am a dead woman!” The biblical narrator explains that Rachel *קנא* envied, her sister Leah. Rachel’s self worth is directly tied to her personal need to be able to bear children, and to her constantly comparing herself to her sister

¹⁷ Rabbi David Kimhi, (1160–1235) known as Radak was born in Maistre Petit. A grammarian and exegete of Narbonne, Provence, Kimhi endeavored to utilize the methodology of Ibn Ezra and the elder Kimhis, stressing scientific philological analysis and de-emphasizing homiletical digression. Kimhi relied heavily on rabbinic literature. Kimhi strove for clarity and readability in an attempt to depart from the compression and obscurity of his predecessors.

Leah's fertility. By using the words יָנָה , Rachel emphasizes her emptiness as a woman, since she is unable to conceive. Our commentators Rashi and Ibn Ezra interpret Rachel's plea as her saying, "Pray for me, otherwise I am dead." Rashi and Ibn Ezra both comment that Rachel demanded that Jacob pray for her, just as his father Isaac had prayed for his wife Rebecca when she was barren. This is a reference to Genesis 25:21. Ramban questions Rashi's interpretation that Rachel was simply asking for Jacob to pray for her, as Ramban felt that Rachel's request was more complex. Ramban explains that Rachel asked Jacob to pray for her, because she would die of grief if she could not have children and she expected Jacob to fast and don sackcloth while praying for her so that she would not die. Torah Temimah offers us another interpretation, by explaining that all people without children are thought to be "like the dead." This harsh statement seems to provide the reader with insight into the cultural expectations of women during the biblical and Rabbinic time periods. Rachel's fear is consistent with cultural expectations of women in the Bible.

Jacob responds with anger as he asks Rachel, "Am I in place of God who has withheld you from the fruit of the womb?" Ramban explains that Jacob is angry with Rachel because of her exaggerated expectations that he should mourn intensely for her, and because she threatened him with her death. Jacob's anger with Rachel comes out of his love for her and his desire for her to live. In his response to Rachel, Jacob makes it clear that God has prevented Rachel from conceiving, not Jacob. Here we see how barrenness drives a wedge between Rachel and Jacob, highlighting one of the ways in which a relationship is challenged by infertility. Jacob does not suggest that he will leave Rachel, only that it is neither his fault nor his problem that she is barren. In the end, Rashi

conjectures that Jacob refused to pray for Rachel all together and Ramban teaches that Jacob prayed but stopped when he did not get what he wanted, and then he blamed Rachel. The Rabbis may not have understood the depth of emotions that our foremothers experienced when they were faced with infertility, however they were able to point out the ways in which infertility put a strain on relationships.

In the following verse Rachel offers her maid Bilhah to Jacob, and Bilhah gives birth to two sons. The jealousy between Rachel and Leah continues in their race to birth more and more children by using their maidservants. Unlike Sarai, Leah and Rachel do not express any jealousy towards their maidservants' ability to conceive children with their husband. God opens Leah's womb again in verse 17. God *remembers* Rachel yet again in verse 22, just as God *remembered* Sarah in Genesis 21:1. When God *remembers* one of our foremothers, her situation is reversed and God hears her. Torah Temimah combines all of the action verbs relating to God in its commentary that *now* God remembers Rachel after God *hears* her crying. God does not simply open and close wombs, God remembers, hears and then acts. After God allows Rachel and Leah to give birth to many children, their race to give birth ends as they stand together ready to leave for Canaan with their husband Jacob.

The rivalry between Rachel and Leah reflect the varied emotions including jealousy, fear and believing one's prayers have or have not been answered by God that women coping with infertility today also experience. The transition of Rachel and Leah from rivals to sisters able to live together peacefully by the end of *Parashat Vayeitzei* is remarkable. The strength they garner from one another throughout the portion, both in their rivalry and in standing together against their father, is an example of how women

can look to one another for inspiration and hope even when they do not feel heard or remembered by God.

The questions these chapters bring up for the modern reader include: When and why does God remember or forget women who yearn to give birth? Where can a couple look for guidance as the emotions they feel drive a wedge between them? How does competition among women, jealousy, and rage, alter the experience of the barren woman and her relationship with everyone surrounding her? After years of struggling with infertility as well as strife between relatives and friends, can the relationships between women be mended?

Samuel 1: Hannah, Elkanah and God

Hannah's story is vastly different from the women of Genesis largely because of the type of woman Hannah is. Even though we don't find her story in the Five Books of Moses, her experience cannot go unmentioned. We meet Hannah in the first chapter of the book of Samuel. Hannah sets the stage for a story filled with flawed leaders and the infamous King David. Hannah teaches the reader about the importance of prayer as well as the centrality of God as the supreme ruler over all human beings. Chapter one opens with a weeping woman, Hannah, who is being taunted by her husband's second wife, Peninah. We soon learn that Peninah is taunting Hannah because she does not have any children.

Chapter one begins with a detailed description of Hannah in verse 2 as a אִין לִדָּם childless. Hannah is never described as עֲקֵרָה, a barren woman, as our foremothers are described in Genesis. The reality that God controls the womb is highlighted in verses 5 and 6 when Hannah is described and called by Peninah as, וַיְהוּה סָגַר רַחֲמָהּ Adonai closed

her womb. In this same verse we learn that Elkanah loved Hannah more than Peninah, despite the fact that God closed her womb. The juxtaposition of God closing her womb, and Elkanah loving Hannah more than Peninah sets up a clear distinction between God and Elkanah's independent relationships with Hannah. In verse 6 we also learn that Peninah is referred to as צרתה her rival, also translated as one who causes another woman pain. This word is also found in Genesis to describe Hagar.

In chapter 1 verse 8, Elkanah, Hannah's husband, responds to Hannah's weeping by asking, "Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?" Hannah does not answer with words, but it is clear from her actions that Elkanah's love for her is not enough. Like Rachel, even though Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah and Elkanah favors Hannah over Peninah, Hannah's desire for children is overwhelming. Hannah's relationship with Peninah affects her on multiple levels. Physically she is unable to eat and emotionally she is distraught when Elkanah finds her crying. It is unclear from these first interactions if Elkanah is aware of how Peninah is treating Hannah. Once again, in this biblical narrative, we find two women competing with one another for progeny.

In verse 8 Elkanah shows his concern for Hannah by asking her why she is crying and not eating. It is note worthy that Elkanah does not assume that he understands why Hannah is crying, but he also does not address the underlying issues that have led to her distress. Radak comments on this verse by writing that Elkanah wanted to show his love for Hannah since she did not have children by making it up to Hannah with portions of food. Radak also explains, Elkanah was angry and upset as well, he loved Hannah and wanted to have children with her. Rashi explains that Elkanah observed Hannah when she

was and was not eating not only because he loved her, but also because he wanted her to be nourished so that he could have sons through her.

It is clear that Elkanah recognizes the changes in Hannah's emotional and physical well-being, but he does not seem to understand the roots of her misery. The beginning of this story brings up the challenge of how couples are able or unable to find comfort in one another, when they are unable to have children and are reacting in different ways to their situation. Peninah represents the outside forces that pressure couples to have children, while reminding them of their inability to do so. Peninah's taunting over time affects Hannah greatly, and ultimately strains Hannah's relationship with Elkanah.

In verse 9 and 10 Hannah begins to act on her situation. She never replies to Elkanah's question in verse 8 about why she is not eating, but she begins to eat as it says in verse 9, "After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose."¹⁸ Hannah may not reply to Elkanah because she recognizes that God has closed her womb and there is nothing Elkanah is able to do about it. Unlike our foremothers, Hannah takes her situation into her own hands by asking God, "if you will look upon the suffering of your maidservant and will remember me and not forget your maidservant, and if you will grant your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head."¹⁹ Hannah actively asks for and receives what she wants from God. Hannah prays, pleads, weeps and offers her unborn son to God, each as negotiating tools for receiving what she needs.

¹⁸ Jewish Publication Society, *Hebrew-English Tanakh*, (JPS, Philadelphia, PA: 2000), 571.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 572.

In verse 11 Hannah repeatedly calls herself a maidservant of God. Sarai, Rebekah and Leah each have maidservants, women who they rely on to increase their progeny and build up their houses. Moses is described as a servant of God in Exodus 14:31, implying that his role in life is to serve God and the Israelites, rather than to serve himself. By saying that she is a maidservant of God, Hannah is declaring her selfless intentions while pleading with God to allow her to birth a child. Hannah makes it clear that she will give her son to God. The reader may question Hannah's intentions, as she clearly does not want to be taunted by Peninah anymore, which implies a understandable, yet selfish intention. Hannah asks God to respond to her, in the same manor in which God responded to our foremothers in Genesis. Hannah exclaims, "if you *hear* me (God), give me a child." Hannah promises that she will give her child to God, and he will be dedicated to God. It is worthy to note that she does not mention Elkanah, the father of her unborn child, at all in her request.

For the first time in verse 11, Hannah calls God by the name, יהוה צבאות, Lord of hosts. Radak offers his interpretation of this verse by explaining there are two kinds of humans, one group is superior, they don't reproduce and they don't die. The second group does reproduce and they do die. Here, Hannah is asking, "Which group do I belong to? I've come to you but you are not making me pregnant-If I am inferior I should have children." By calling God the Lord of hosts, Hannah is highlighting God's control over all humanity. Radak's interpretation highlights God's control, and Hannah's understanding of her position in relation to God. Hannah understands that God is the only being that will be able to help her.

After praying and weeping, Eli the priest watched as Hannah's mouth moved but no words came out. In verse 15, Hannah replied to Eli, who thought that she was drunk, by explaining that she has been pouring out her heart to the Lord. Here we notice a parallel theme when Isaac, who also pours out his soul pleading to God, prays for his wife Rebecca. In verse 18 we notice that something has changed as Hannah begins to eat. Ralbag²⁰ interprets her eating as a sign that she is calm now and she believes her prayers have been heard. Ralbag also explains that Hannah knows she is a strong woman, an אישה קשת רוח. In this story Hannah approaches God and asks God to listen to her, in our Genesis narratives the women waited for God to hear them. Hannah is a very persistent woman, over and over again she negotiates with God by explaining that, "if you will look upon the suffering of your maidservant, and if you remember me...and if you will grant your maidservant a child, I will dedicate him to the Lord..."²¹ In verse 19 God remembers Hannah just as she requested. She names her son *Shmuel*, literally, and God heard. She then explains, dwelling on the words of Eli's promise in verse 17, שאלתי, God has responded to literally what she has asked for. After weaning Samuel, Hannah gives Samuel to God to become a Nazarite priest.

Chapter two opens with Hannah's prayer to God. Hannah exclaims God's powerful role in her triumph over her enemies and in her deliverance. The poem begins with Hannah exclaiming, "My horn is raised high through the Lord."²² In his translation of this text, Robert Alter explains, "The idea seems to be that the animal's horn is its

²⁰ Levi Ben Gershom (1288–1344) known by his acronym: Ra-LBa-G; also called Maestre Leo de Bagnols; Magister Leo Hebraeus; Gersonides was a mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and biblical commentator, born at Bagnols-sur-Cize. From each book of the Bible, Ralbag extracts the ethical, philosophical, and religious teachings that may be gleaned from the text and calls them *to'alot* or *to'aliyyot*.

²¹ *JPS-Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 572.

²² Robert Alter, *The David Story, A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, (W.W. Norton and Company, New York:1999), 9.

glory and power, held high, perhaps in triumph after goring an enemy into submission.”²³

Hannah restates that there is no one like God and God measures all human actions. The Lord, Hannah explains, brings justice to the world. And ultimately, the Lord bestows power to the kingship, which sets the stage for the remainder of the two books of Samuel. These statements sound a bit out of place for a woman who has recently overcome infertility, yet her experience reflects her feelings of victory, she has overcome Peninah, and she conquered her ultimate enemy, barrenness. It is significant to note that no other women in the Bible offers a prayer like this one to God after conception.

Conclusion

The experiences of Sarai, Rachel, Leah, Rebekah and Hannah set the stage for generations of cultural expectations for Jewish women. Their experiences with barrenness are varied and unique. They each communicate with God and their spouses in ways that match their own needs and desires. Standing alone, our foremothers' experiences reflect the Biblical realities that they lived within. Read with commentary from numerous generations of Jewish scholars, the complicated choices our foremothers had to make are highlighted. The ways in which their lives and relationships were altered because of their infertility is not unlike the experiences of women today.

²³ *ibid*, pg 9.

Chapter 2

Rabbinic Insights on a Biblical and Modern Struggle

The following *midrashim* comment extensively on how one's interpersonal relationships, one's emotional well being, and one's relationship with God are affected by coping with barrenness. Our rabbis imagined how our foremothers and forefathers coped with barrenness and they aimed to answer many questions that we still struggle with today in our modern society. While the Rabbis did not have access to the psychological research that we do today about the challenges that arise from barrenness, through their *midrashim*, they do seem to have insight into this human experience. This chapter is broken up into three sections; 1. The Barren Woman, Her Unique Experience, 2. Interpersonal Relationships and her Community, 3. God's Role. These three sections illustrate the centrality of fertility in biblical society, family life, relationships and ultimately, in one's connection with God.

The Barren Woman: Her Unique Experience

What does it feel like to be a barren woman in biblical society?

*Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXI:1*²⁴

“When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” (Gen. 29:31): “For the Lord hears the needy and does not despise his prisoners” (Ps. 69:34) “...and does not despise his prisoners’ refers to barren women, who are as prisoners in their houses. When the Holy One, blessed be he, remembers them with children, they are able to stand up straight. You may know that that is the case, for lo, Leah was the hated of the household, and once the Holy One blessed be he remembered her with children, she was able to stand up straight: When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb.”

²⁴ Midrash Rabbah translations taken from: Genesis Rabbah The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, A New American Translation. Volume II and III, by Neusner, Jacob, (Scholars Press, Atlanta Georgia: 1985).

In this *midrash* God responds to Leah's life situation. Jacob wants to marry Rachel, but Laban gave Leah to Jacob first because of their birth order. Jacob does not love Leah as much as Rachel and God recognizes this. God's role as an omniscient being is apparent in this *midrash*. It is clear that God has complete control of the womb and God sees everything that goes on in our matriarch's lives. God opens Leah's womb, which implies that God is able to close the womb as well. Leah and all barren women are described as prisoners in their homes. Once God notices Leah, God opens her womb and she is released from her bondage. The Rabbis recognized the shame that barren women experienced and the fact that they remained in their homes, in bondage, because they were unwilling and unable to face society. Once God saw Leah, she was able to "stand up straight" and return to society, as a wife able to fulfill her role as a mother. This *midrash* teaches us that barren women felt as though they were prisoners, they felt ashamed and in Leah's case they were seen and loved by God, not hated.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXI:6

"When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister, and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children or I shall die'" (Gen. 30:1) Said R. Isaac, "Let not your heart envy sinners' (Prov. 23:17), and yet you say, 'she envied her sister'? "The sense is that she envied her for her good deeds. She said, 'If she [I] were righteous, she to would give birth.'"

This *midrash* expresses the jealousy and envy that our foremothers felt towards one another in their barrenness. In this case, Rachel envied Leah. The Rabbis, in explaining the verse from Psalms, wanted to ensure that Genesis 30:1 did not imply that Leah was a sinner. On the contrary, Rachel envies Leah for her good deeds, and Rachel does not understand why she is unable to have children as well. Rachel's exclamation to

Jacob teaches us both that she was able to share her distress with her husband, and that being unable to have children is akin to death. The experience of barren women, as we read in the preceding *midrash*, is filled with shame and so much internal pain that one would rather die than live.

“...and she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children or I shall die’” (Gen. 30:1): Said Samuel, “Four are regarded as tantamount to dead: a blind person, one afflicted with *saraat*, one who has no children, and one who has lost all his money. “We learn the matter concerning one who has no children from the case of Rachel: ‘Give me children or I shall die.’

A continuation of the previous *midrash*, this *midrash* further explains Rachel’s exclamation that she will die if she is unable to bear children. Samuel explains that one who has no children is regarded as if she is dead. Rachel is compared to a blind person, one afflicted with *tzaraat* (a skin condition) and one who has lost all of his money. In biblical society these types of people were unable to participate in society. One with *tzaraat* had to live in seclusion, one without any money was unable to participate in commerce and a blind person would be subject to the dangers of the environment. Rachel’s statement provides the source text for Samuel to add barren women to this list. One could hypothesize that a barren woman, filled with envy and shame, would not be able to fulfill her role in society as a mother, just as the first three individuals are unable to fulfill their roles. Samuel classified Rachel’s unique experience as a way to understand the severity of barrenness.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:2

“And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’” (Gen. 16:2): She said, “I know the source for my malady. It is not as people say, ‘She needs a talisman, she needs a charm.’ Rather: ‘Behold now *the lord* has prevented me from

bearing children.’ (Gen. 16:2).” “...it may be that I shall obtain children by her” (Gen. 16:2): It has been taught on Tannaite authority: Whoever does not have a child is as though he were dead and destroyed. As though dead: “And she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children or else I am dead’” (Gen. 30:1). As though destroyed: “...it may be that I shall obtain [literally: built up, hence, rebuilt] children by her” (Gen. 16:2). Building up takes place only in the case of destruction.

Sarai’s experience with barrenness is unique primarily because of the way she responds to her situation. Unlike Rachel and Leah, in this *midrash*, Sarai’s first response is to tell her husband to reproduce with her maid Hagar. Her quick decision making, leads her to tell her husband what the next steps will be. Sarai seems to understand the severity of her situation, and she wastes no time coming up with a solution. We learn that soon after this encounter, Sarai becomes jealous of Hagar; her initial response to her barrenness may have disregarded her emotional state of mind. Sarai believes God has a plan for her.

Like Leah and Rachel, Sarai understands that God has prevented her from bearing children. Later in chapter 17 God tells Sarai that she will have a son, and she laughs. Her laughing is understandable based on her acceptance in this *midrash* that God has prevented her from having children. This *midrash* once again quotes Rachel saying that if she is not given children she will be dead. The Rabbis compare Sarai’s exclamation that she will be *destroyed* to Rachel’s insistence that she will be *dead*. The Rabbis interpret Sarai’s suggestion that she be “built up” through Hagar by explaining that one only needs to be built up if they have been destroyed or in Rachel’s case, are like dead. The experience of barren women is that they need to be built up through the birth of a child, either from their own womb or from their maidservants’.

“And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai” (Gen 16:2): R. Yose says, “It was to the voice of the holy spirit, in line with the following verse: ‘Now therefore hearken to the voice of the words of the Lord’ (I Sam. 15:1)

In this continuation of the *midrash* above, R. Yose explains that God speaks through Sarai, and therefore Abraham listens to her. This *midrash* is attempting to explain Abraham’s passive behavior. Abraham listens to Sarai and does everything she asks of him in this short episode. In this case, the experience of the barren woman is that of a woman in control of her household. She finds solutions to the challenges in her life, and she is so powerful that the Rabbis believed the spirit of God spoke through her.

*Midrash Sefer Ha-Aggadah: 1 Samuel 1:6*²⁵

“*And her rival vexed her sore.*” Peninah would vex Hannah with one annoying taunt after another. What would Peninah say to her? “Did you get a scarf for your older son and an undergarment for your second son?” Then, too, Peninah would get up early—so said R. Nahman bar Abba—and say to Hannah, “Why don’t you rouse yourself and wash your children’s faces, so that they will be fit to go to school?” At twelve o’clock, she would say, “Hannah, why don’t you rouse yourself and welcome your children who are about to return from school?”

In this *midrash* the Rabbis imagine Hannah in their world. They compare Peninah’s taunting to women who prepare their children for *Beit Sefer*, the house of study, and welcome them home when they return. Hannah is unable to participate in this ritual since she does not have any children. The Rabbis explain that Hannah is angry with Peninah. She may also be angry with herself and God.

Midrash Sefer Ha-Aggadah, 1 Samuel 1:6

By what parable may Hannah’s petition be illustrated? By the one of a king of flesh and blood who made a feast for his servants. A poor man came and, standing by the doorway, begged them, “Give me a morsel of bread,” but no one heeded him. So he forced his way

²⁵ Ed. Bialik, Hayim Nahman, and Ravnitzky, Yehoshua Hana, Translated by Braude, William G, The Book of Legends, Sefer Ha-Aggadah, (Schocken Books, NY) 1992. All Midrash Sefer Ha’ Aggadah citations are from this translation.

into the presence of the king and said, “My lord king, out of the entire feast you have made, it is so difficult in your sight to give me one morsel of bread?”

Another comment: Hannah used to go up to the Sanctuary on festival pilgrimages, and when she observed all Israel gathered there, she would say to the Holy One: Master of the universe, You have all these hosts, but among them not even one is mine.

In this *midrash* Hannah shares her frustration with God. God provides for everyone else, why has she not been provided for? Hannah compares herself to a poor person at a feast unable to eat a piece of bread. This comparison works well with her situation as it reminds us that Hannah is so distraught, she is unable to eat. The second tale places Hannah at a festival asking God for a divine presence or ministering angel to help her out. Hannah knows what she is missing in life, she watches as Peninah takes care of her children, just as God takes care of God’s people. Through these tales Hannah asks God, why am I unable to have children? A poor person needs to eat, and Hannah needs God to provide her with a divine angel in this festival of life. Using a new method of communication distinct from our foremothers’ approaches, Hannah reasons with God.

Midrash Sefer Ha-Aggadah 1 Samuel 1:13

“Now Hannah, she spoke about her heart.” about matters, so said R. Eleazar in the name of R. Yose ben Zimra, that were in her heart. She spoke right up to the Holy One: Master of the universe, of all that You create in woman, there is not one part without its purpose—eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to work with, legs to walk with, breast to give suck. The breasts You placed over my heart—what are they for? Are they not to give suck? Give me a son, that I may give him suck with them.

In this *midrash* Hannah challenges God. She is no longer negotiating, she is now confronting God and asking, “did you create my body in vain?” Hannah explains that we have eyes to see, and ears to hear, and breasts to suckle. Why did God give her breasts if she could not use them to nourish a child? The Rabbis are playing with the words in verse

13, “Hannah was praying in (or on, על-לבך) her heart.”²⁶ Her breasts, which lay on her heart are not serving their function. Hannah’s willingness to confront God about God’s own creation illustrates to the reader her strong will and her ability to negotiate with her God who she clearly feels she has a strong connection with.

²⁶ JPS. Hebrew-English Tanakh, 572.

**The Barren Woman within her World:
Interpersonal Relationships and her Community**

A. How are Barren Women perceived within their Communities?

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXI:6

“...and she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children or I shall die’” (Gen. 30:1): Said Samuel, “Four are regarded as tantamount to dead: a blind person, one afflicted with *saraat*, one who has no children, and one who has lost all his money.” We learn the matter concerning one who has no children from the case of Rachel: ‘Give me children or I shall die.’

The Rabbis comment extensively on Genesis 30:1 in their *midrashim*. Here, Rabbi Samuel responds to Rachel’s insistence that if Jacob does not give her children she will die. Rabbi Samuel states that a childless woman is like a dead woman. Rabbi Samuel repeats the Rabbis’ teaching that four are regarded as dead and Rachel’s comment places barren women on that list. This list is a commentary on how individuals are regarded within their community. For Rachel, she believes she will be regarded as dead within her family and home, as well as her larger community.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:4

“And he went in to Hagar and she conceived” (Gen. 16:4)
Now why were the foremothers barren? R. Levi in the name of R. Shila, R. Helbo in the name of R. Yohanan: “The Holy One, blessed be he, lusts after their prayer and mediation: ‘O my dove, you are as the clefts of the rock’ (Song 2:14). ‘Why did I make you barren? So that “I might see your countenance, hear your voice” (Song 2:14).’” R. Azariah in the name of R. Hinena: “It was so that they should depend upon their husbands despite their beauty [since they would want to have sexual relations to produce children].” R. Hunah, R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Hiyya bar Abba, “It was so that they might live out the greater part of their years without the subjugation [of child raising].” R. Huna, R. Idi, R. Abin in the name of R. Meir: “It was so that their husbands should have pleasure with them. For so long as a woman receives pregnancies, she loses her looks and lacks grace. For all of those ninety years before Sarah had a child, she was as beautiful as a bride in her marriage canopy.”

This *midrash*, through Sarai, provides numerous reasons for our foremothers' barrenness. The first reason given is because God yearned for her prayers and supplications. This could be read in two very distinct ways. In the first instance, Sarai was responsible for her barrenness because she did not turn to God in prayer. Or we could read this *midrash* as God preventing Sarai from conceiving, because God did not want Sarai to stop praying to God. In both situations, God created barren women and God provides their key to fertility. The Rabbis quote ש'ר הש'ר'ם as they explain God's lust for our matriarch's meditations. This *midrash* highlights the fact that God has the ability to open and close the womb. God waits for and takes pleasure in our foremothers' prayers before allowing them to conceive.

Rabbi Azariah explains that the foremothers needed to depend on their husbands to help them bear children. This explanation teaches us that the women were not always drawn to their husbands, but because they knew they had to be with them in order to have children and overcome their barrenness, they would succumb to their husband's desires.

Finally this *midrash* explains that women are barren so that their lives had a purpose before childbearing. And the Rabbis describe women as beautiful when they are not pregnant. Women lose their looks and their grace when they are pregnant, and their husbands do not find pleasure with them. This *midrash* emphasizes our foremothers' responsibilities to God and their husbands.

B. How did our Biblical couples communicate with one another given their difficult situations?

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXI:7

"Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?'" (Gen. 30:2): Rabbis of the south in the

name of R. Alexandri, Rabbana in the name of R. Abba bar Kahana: “Should a wise man make answer with windy knowledge and fill his belly with the east wind?” (Job 15:1) “Should a wise man make answer with windy knowledge’ refers to Abraham: ‘And Abraham hearkened to the voice of Sarah’ (Gen. 16:2). “and fill his belly with the east wind?” speaks of Jacob: ‘Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”’ “Said the Holy One, blessed be he, to him, ‘Is this the proper way to answer women in distress. By your life, your children are destined to stand before her son [Joseph].”

This *midrash* begins with Jacob angrily blaming Rachel for her infertility. Jacob exclaims, “God has not given *you* children.” Jacob continues to explain that God controls her womb; Rachel needs to work this issue out with God, not Jacob. God responds with empathy for Rachel by telling Jacob that he needs to respond to his wife in a more compassionate way.

“Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” “From you he has withheld children, from me he has not withheld them.” She said to him, “Is this what your father did for your mother?” Did he not gird his loins for her?” He said to her, “But he had no children at all, while I have children.” She said to him, “And your grandfather had no children, but he girded his loins for Sarah.” He said to her, “Can you do deeds such as my grandmother did?” She said to him, “And what did she do?” He said to her, “She brought her rival, co-wife into her own household.” She said to him, “If that’s what is holding things up, then: ‘Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees, and even I may have children through her’ (Gen. 30:3).

“Just as that one [Sarah] was given a household through her rival, so I shall be given a household through my rival [as a reward for bringing her into my household].”

This *midrash* continues by showing Jacob and Rachel’s stages of communication as together they decide how they will be able to have children. After being scolded by God, Jacob begins to listen to his wife. Rachel reminds Jacob that both his father and grandfather experienced difficulty conceiving with their wives but they did not get angry with Sarah or Rebecca. Rachel continues by offering Jacob role models based on his own family for how they can move forward. Jacob does not see a correlation between his situation and Isaac’s because Isaac did not have any children when he “girded his loins”

for Rebecca. Jacob asks Rachel if she can do what his grandmother Sarah did, referring to Sarah's decision to give her handmaid Hagar to Abraham. Together, Rachel and Jacob find role models in Sarah and Abraham, and they agree to surrogacy. By creating this dialog, the Rabbis place Rachel and Jacob into a family lineage of couples that dealt with infertility. They are not alone in their struggle and they are able to come to a decision through open communication and by looking back at the experiences of their parents and grandparents.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:2

“And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her’” (Gen. 16:2) She said, “I know the source for my malady. It is not as people say, ‘She needs a talisman, she needs a charm.’ Rather: ‘Behold now, *the Lord* has prevented me from bearing children’ (Gen. 16:2).” “...it may be that I shall obtain children by her” (Gen. 16:2): “And Abraham hearkened to the voice of Sarai” (Gen. 16:2): R. Yose says, “It was to the voice of the holy spirit, in line with the following verse: ‘Now therefore hearken to the voice of the words of the Lord’ (I Sam. 15:1)

In this *midrash* Sarai explains that she knows God has prevented her from bearing children. Sarai seems to understand her situation and she accepts that she will be able to have children by using Hagar. R. Yose points out that God is speaking through Sarai. This may be why Abram follows Sarai's lead. Sarai's acceptance of her situation suggests that our foremothers understood God's role in childbearing and they did their best to follow what they believed God expected of them. In this case, Sarai was also able to convince Abram to follow her lead.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:5

“And Sarai said to Abram, ‘May the wrong [done to me be on you. I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!]’” (Gen. 16:5) R. Yudan in the name

of R. Judah: “You wrong me with words. Why so? Because you hear me humiliated and say nothing.”

In this midrash Rabbi Yudan and Judah interpret Sarai’s words to Abram. The Rabbis explain that Sarai felt humiliated when Abram did not stick up for her. Hagar looked down upon Sarai after Hagar became pregnant, but Abram did not support his wife when she was in pain. The Rabbis are able to understand Sarai’s perspective and challenges at a time when her husband is not. This midrash highlights the tensions that Sarai and Abram experienced after Sarai offered Hagar as a surrogate.

C. How did our Biblical Couples Treat One Another?

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:5

“And Sarai said to Abram, ‘May the wrong [done to me be on you. I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!]’” (Gen. 16:5)

R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Abba: “ ‘I have a case against you.’ “The matter may be compared to the case of two men who were in prison. The king went by. One of them said, ‘Do justice for me.’ The king said to let him go. The other said to him, ‘I have a case against you. If you had said, “Do justice for *us*,” just as he let you out, so he would have let me out. But since you said, “Do justice for me,” only you were released. I was not released.’ “Similarly [Sarai speaks,] ‘If you had said, “*We* go childless,” then, just as [God] gave you a child, so he would have given me one. And what you said was, “And I go childless” (Gen. 15:2), so he gave you a child, but to me he gave no child.’ “The matter may further be compared to the case of two men who were going to borrow seed from the king. One of them said, ‘Let me borrow seed.’ The king gave orders to give it to him. His fellow said to him, ‘I have a case against you. If you had said, “Let us borrow some seed from you,” just as he gave seed to you, so he would have given it to me. But since you said, “Let *me* borrow some seed,” to you he gave, but to me he did not give.’ “Along these same lines, [Sarai speaks,] ‘If you had said, “Behold to us you have given no seed,” then, just as he gave to you so he would have given to me. But what you said was, “Behold, to *me* you have given no seed.”’ (Gen. 15:3).”

In this *midrash*, once again the Rabbis comment on Sarai’s statement to Abraham that he humiliated her and they present a short story to explain Sarai’s frustration with Abram. Rabbi Berekhiah, in the name of Rabbi Abba, explains that when Abram asked

God for children in chapter 15 he said, “God, what will you give me, seeing that I go childless.” Abram uses the pronoun “I” instead of “we”. In the story above the Rabbis compare Abram and Sarai to two prisoners. One prisoner asks the king to do justice for him, not both of them. In the second story, two men looked to borrow seed from the king and the first man asked for seed for himself, but he did not include the second man. The second man, like Sarai, feels as though he was left out and not included in the request. The result was that the king, or in Sarai’s case, God, did not give them what they needed to live.

Through these rabbinic comparisons, the Rabbis illustrate how Sarai blames Abram for her inability to conceive. The Rabbis who created this *midrash* challenge others that come before it describing Sarai’s understanding that God has a plan for her. Here Sarai is depicted as blaming Abram for their inability to conceive. We are left questioning, who is really to blame for infertility?

Genesis XLV:5 continued

R. Menahama in the name of R. Abun: “When the text says, ‘My wrong be upon you’ (Gen. 16:5) the meaning is, “She scratched his face” since the word for ‘wrong’ and ‘scratch’ share the same letters. Thus ‘my scratch be upon you.’

Rabbis say, “Four traits apply to women. They are greedy, nosy, lazy and envious...” R. Joshua b. Nehemiah said, “Also they scratch and blab.”

In the continuation of this *midrash*, Sarai is depicted as very angry because she thinks it is Abram’s fault that she does not conceive and she is upset that he did not stop Hagar from insulting her. R. Joshua b. Nehemiah explains that Sarai scratches Abram’s face. Nehemiah is able to expound on Gen. 16:5 by playing with the word *hammasi*-my wrong, and reading it to mean *himmes*-the scratch. In this *midrash*, Sarai turns to Abram

and he does not answer her in the way that she expected. Their inability to communicate with one another clearly, negatively affects their relationship.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:5

“May the Lord judge between you and me!” (Gen. 16:5): R. Tanhuma in the name of R. Hiyya the Elder, R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Eleazar: “Whoever jumps into litigation does not come out untouched. “Sarah was worthy of reaching the ripe old age that Abraham reached, but because she said, ‘May the Lord judge between you and me!’ forty-eight years were removed from her life.” Said R. Hoshaiyah, “The word for ‘you’ is written as it were ‘your son.’ “[What actually happened?] Since it is written, ‘And he went in to Hagar and she conceived’ (Gen. 16:4), why is it also stated, ‘Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son’ (Gen. 16:11)? [It indicates that she had become pregnant but had lost the first child, and the appearance of the later verse] teaches that the evil eye had gone into her and made her abort her baby.”

In this *midrash* the Rabbis explain at length the various ways in which Sarai hurts herself by choosing to voice her anger. The first few lines of the *midrash* explain that when Sarai exclaims, “May the lord judge between you and me!” she is putting herself into litigation, into an argument, between herself, Abram and God, and she will not come out unscathed. The Rabbis explain that because of this comment, forty-eight years are removed from Sarai’s lifetime. When Sarai shows anger towards Abram and ultimately towards God, she is reprimanded.

In the second section of this *midrash*, Sarai’s words are perceived as powerful. When Sarai says, “May the lord judge between you and me”, she means *your son*, Abram’s son with Hagar. This reading of the verse attempts to prove that in Gen. 16:11 Hagar had been pregnant with a baby and Sarai’s words produced the evil eye, which made Hagar miscarry her first child. When the angel told Hagar that she would have a son, the angel was referring to the child from her second pregnancy. The way that Sarai treats Abram in this *midrash* has repercussions that extend beyond their relationship.

Sarai's words spoken to Abram affect Hagar's unborn fetus that she conceived with Abram, as well as Sarai's relationship with Abram and God.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:6

“But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Behold your maid is in your power. [Do to her as you please.]’ Then Sarai dealt harshly with her and she fled from her” (Gen. 16:6): He said, “It is important to me to do her neither good nor evil. It is written, ‘You shall not deal with her as a slave, because you have humbled her’ (Deut. 21:14). As to this one, after we have given her anguish, shall we now make her a slave again? “It is important to me to do her neither good nor evil. It is written, ‘Then Sarai dealt harshly with her and she fled from her’ (Gen. 16:6).’ It is further written, ‘To sell her to a foreign people he shall have no power, seeing that he has dealt deceitfully with her’ (Ex. 21:8). As to this one, after we made her a mistress of the house, shall we turn her again into a slave-woman? “It is important to me to do her neither good nor evil. It is written, ‘Then Sarai dealt harshly with her and she fled from her’ (Gen. 16:6) R. Abba said, “She deprived her of sexual relations.” R. Berekhiah said, “She slapped her face with a shoe.” R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Abba: “Water buckets and towels she gave to her charge for the bath [so humiliating her].”

In this Midrash Abram tells Sarai that she is in control of Hagar. Therefore, Sarai and Abram continue to negotiate with one another about how they will treat Hagar now that Sarai's jealousy has surfaced. Sarai becomes upset with Abram and jealous of Hagar because Hagar conceived. Sarai treats Hagar harshly and Abram does not know how to respond to Sarai's jealousy and anger. Abram tells Sarai they have already enslaved Hagar, he does not want to treat her badly. Sarai and Abram are dealing with emotions that they did not anticipate now that they have used Hagar as a surrogate. They are a couple that has found themselves having a hard time communicating with one another in this new and challenging situation.

D. The Rabbis Did Not Know Who to Blame

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:1

“Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. (Gen. 16:1) “A woman of valor who can find? For her price is far above rubies” (Prov. 31:10) What is the meaning of the word translated “price”? R. Abba bar Kahana said, It refers to her pregnancy, in line with this verse: ‘Your origin and your nativity’ (Ez. 16:3) Abram was a year older than Nahor. Nahor was a year older than Haran. So Abram was two years older than Haran. There was a year of pregnancy with Milcah and a year of the pregnancy with Iscah, and it turns out that Haran produced children when he was six years old. And [if Haran could do it,] how then could Abram not produce a child? [The fault was Sarai’s:] “And *Sarai* was barren, *she* had no child” (Gen. 11:30). “She had born him no children” (Gen. 16:1) R. Judah says, “To him,” that is, to Abram in particular she had not produced a child, but if she had been married to someone else, she would have produced a child.” R. Nehemiah says, “Neither for him nor for anyone else [could she produce a child].” How then does R. Nehemiah interpret the verse, “She had born him no children”? Explain the passage to mean, “To him and to her,” so, she did not bear “for herself” on Sarai’s account, or “for him” on Abram’s account.

In this *midrash*, the Rabbis attempt to understand why Sarai was unable to have children with Abram. R. Abba bar Kahana explains that Nahor and Haran were able to produce children, so it was Sarai’s, not Abram’s fault that they were unable to conceive. R. Judan disagrees when he points out that if Sarai had been married to someone else she would have produced a child. R. Nehemiah ends the argument by explaining that Sarai did not bear children on both her and Abram’s account; they were both to blame for her infertility.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:3

“And Sarai Abram’s wife took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife” (Gen. 16:3): She drew her along with persuasive words, saying to her, “Happy are you, that you will cleave to that holy body.” “So after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan” (Gen. 16:3): R. Ammi in the name of R. Simeon b. Laqish: “How on the basis of Scripture do we know that rule that we have learned in the Mishnah: If one has married a woman and lived with her for ten years and not produced a child, he is not allowed to remain sterile [but must marry someone else] [M. Yeb. 15:6]? Proof derives from this verse: ‘So after Abram had dwelt ten years’ The statement ‘...in the land of Canaan...’ further proves that the years of marriage spent outside of the Land of Israel do not count.” “She gave her to Abram her husband” (Gen. 16:3)—and not to anyone else. “...as a wife” (Gen. 16:3)—and not as a concubine.

This *midrash* suggests that Sarai's decision to give Hagar to Abram after ten years of marriage without being able to conceive a child is the source of a law in the Mishnah. The law states that if a man has lived with his wife for ten years without producing a child, he is obligated to marry another woman. The fact that the *midrash* begins with the description of Sarai drawing Hagar to Abram with persuasive words suggests that Sarai and Abram agreed to use Hagar as a surrogate and a wife to Abram. The *midrash* points out that she will be his wife, not his concubine. This *midrash* suggests that after ten years a couple is allowed to explore alternative options for having children and surrogacy is one of the possibilities.

E. How did the Women of the Bible Support One Another?

Midrash Rabbah- Genesis LXXII:6

"Afterwards she bore him a daughter and called her name Dinah" (Gen. 30:21) B. If a man's wife was pregnant and he said, "May it please God that my wife give birth to a male child," lo, this is a vain prayer [M. Ber. 9:3]. C. A member of the house of R. Yanni said, "The cited paragraph of the Mishnah treats a case in which the wife is already sitting on the labor stool [by which point the matter is decided, one way or the other, anyhow]." D. Said R. Judah bar Pazzi, "Even if the wife is already sitting on the labor stool, the sex of the child can change, in line with this verse: 'O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? Says the Lord. Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O House of Israel' (Jer. 18:6) E. An objection was raised from the following verse: "Afterwards she bore him a daughter and called her name Dinah." [There was no issue of changing the birth of that child at the last minute.] He said to them, "In point of fact, while Dinah was taking shape, in the main she was to be a male, but on account of the prayer of Rachel, who has said, 'May the Lord add to me another son!' (Gen. 30:24), she was turned into a girl-child. [Freedman, p. 666, n. 7: Since Jacob was only destined to beget twelve sons, this one had to be a daughter.]"

A. Said R. Haninah b. Pazzi, "The foremothers were prophetesses, and Rachel was one of them. 'May the Lord add to me more sons' is not what she said, rather '...another son.' "She said, 'Jacob is going to produce yet one more son, and would that it come forth from me.' C. Said R. Haninah, "The foremothers got together and said, 'We have enough males, let this [Rachel] one be remembered with a male child."

This *midrash* places our foremothers in a very positive light as prophetesses. Elevated to the prophet status they foresee the future. They pray for Rachel to have another son, and even though Leah's daughter Dinah was a male child in her womb, Rachel wants to give birth to Jacob's final son so Leah has a daughter. Rachel's prayers are heard and listened to by God. This *midrash* begins by explaining that a man's prayers are not heard in altering a child's sex post-conception. Together the women supported Rachel, bolstering her prayers so that she was able to have a son. In this case the women support one another by praying for equality among themselves-so that they will all be remembered.

F. How did our foremothers respond to difficult pregnancies?

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXIII:6

"And the children struggled together [within her, and she said, 'If it is thus, why do I live?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger']" (Gen. 25:22-23): When she went by houses of idolatry, Esau would kick, trying to get out: "The wicked are estranged from the womb" (Ps. 58:4). When she went by synagogues and study-houses, Jacob would kick, trying to get out: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jer. 1:5)." "...and she said 'If it is thus, why do I live?' R. Haggai in the name of R. Isaac: "This teaches that our mother, Rebecca, went around to the doors of women and said to them, 'Did you ever have this kind of pain in your life?' 'If thus:' If this is the pain of having children, would that I had not gotten pregnant.'" Said R. Huna, "If I am going to produce twelve tribes only through this kind of suffering, would that I had not gotten pregnant."

In this *midrash* Rebekah looks to other women for support and guidance as she deals with her painful pregnancy. Rebekah first turns to God who explains that two nations are struggling in her womb. Rebekah responds by saying, "If this is God's explanation, why am I alive?" The Rabbis interpret her question by explaining that Rebekah must have asked the other women if they had experienced this kind of pain. The

Rabbi's continue by explaining that even if Rebekah knew that she was going to produce twelve tribes, if she knew it would be this painful she would have not gotten pregnant.

God's Role

When and how does God Recognize and Respond to our pain?

A. Responding to the Prisoner

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXI:1

“When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” (Gen. 29:31) “For the Lord hears the needy and does not despise his prisoners” (Ps. 69:34). Said R. Benjamin b. Levi, “The beginning of this verse does not match the end, and the end does not match the beginning. “The verse had need to state only: ‘For the Lord hears the needy and does not despise prisoners.’ “or: ‘For the Lord hears *his* needy and does not despise *his* prisoners.’ “ ‘For the Lord hears the needy’ speaks of Israel. “For R. Yohanan said, ‘In any passage in which the Scripture refers to the poor and needy, Scripture speaks in particular of Israel.’ “ ‘...and does not despise his prisoners’ refers to barren women, who are as prisoners in their houses. “When the Holy One, blessed be he, remembers them with children, they are able to stand up straight. “You may know that this is the case, for lo, Leah was the hated of the household, and once the Holy One blessed be he remembered her with children, she was able to stand up straight: “When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb.””

Midrash Rabbah Genesis LXXI:2

“The Lord upholds all that fall and raises up all who are bowed down” (Ps. 145:14): This refers to the barren women, who fall down in their own homes. “...and raises up all who are bowed down” (Ps. 145:14): When the Holy One, blessed be he, remembers them with children, they are able to stand up straight. You may know that that is the case, for lo, Leah was the hated of the household, and once the Holy One blessed be he remembered her with children, she was able to stand up straight: “When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb.”

In the first *midrash* Rabbi Yohanan explains that the phrase, “God hears the needy and does not despise his prisoners,” refers to Jacob (Israel) and barren women who are prisoners in their homes. By explaining this verse in this way we learn that Jacob and Leah are experiencing pain and God responds to both of them. In this metaphor God is

the jail keeper and those who are barren are the prisoners. As we read in previous *midrashim*, when God visits a barren woman she is able to stand up straight. In the second part of this *midrash*, God responds to the fact that Leah was hated by her community by opening her womb. Leah was a prisoner in her home because she was hated and barren, and God released her and gave her children.

B. God Responds to Those who Pour out their Hearts

Midrash Rabbah Genesis LXXI:2

“When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” (Gen. 29:31): For she did the deeds of those who hate [Israel]. For she had been bespoken to the one who hates Israel. This is the stipulation: the older daughter will be for the older son, [that is, Esau,] and the younger daughter for the younger son, [that is, Jacob].’ So she wept, saying, “May it be God’s will that I not fall into the domain of the wicked Esau.” Said R. Huna, “Great is prayer, for it nullified the decree, and not only that, but she came before her sister.” R. Judah bar Simon, R. Hanan in the name of R. Samuel b. R. Isaac: “When our father, Jacob, saw that Leah had deceived him concerning her sister, he considered divorcing her. But when the Holy One, blessed be he, remembered her with children, he said, ‘Should I divorce the mother of these children?’ “In the end he accepted the matter: ‘And Israel bowed down to the bed’s head’ (Gen. 47:31). “And who was at the head of the bed of our father, Jacob? Was it not Leah?”

According to the Rabbis, God responds to those who poured out their hearts in prayer. This *midrash* is an example of the power of Leah’s prayers. According to the Rabbis, Leah wept and prayed so that she would not have to marry Esau. Leah was considered the hated one because she was expected to marry Esau, who hated his brother Jacob. The fact that God opened up her womb and allowed her to conceive with Jacob, gave Jacob a reason to stay with her even though he was determined to divorce her. This *midrash* brings up many questions. Why does God respond to Leah in this situation, but not in other situations? If Leah and Jacob had not been able to conceive, would he have

left her? Does/should an anticipated child keep a marriage together or save a marriage?

Our Rabbis commented on a solution that couples still turn to today.

Midrash Rabbah Genesis LXIII:5

“And Isaac prayed to or entreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebecca his wife conceived.” Gen. 25:21

R. Yohanan and R. Simeon b. Laqish, R. Yohanan said, “He poured our prayers in proliferation.” R. Simeon b. Laqish said, “He overturned the decree.”

“for his wife:” This teaches that Isaac was prostrate on one side, and she was prostrate on the other. He said before the Holy One, blessed be he, “Lord of the age, all of the children which you are going to give to me should come from that righteous woman. [I do not want children from a concubine.]” And she said the same thing.

“...because she was barren:” R. Yudan in the name of R. Simeon b. Laquish: She has no ovary, so the Holy One, blessed be he, formed an ovary for her.”

In this *midrash* before God opens up Rebekah’s womb, Isaac “pours out” his prayers, he trusts God and is committed to having children with Rebekah. Isaac’s abundant prayers reverse Rebekah’s destiny as a barren woman.

In this midrash both Isaac and Rebekah are actively praying. They both believe that their spouse is a righteous person and they will have children because of their spouse’s merit. God hears their prayers and God cures Rebekah’s physical problem that has led to her barrenness.

Midrash Rabbah Genesis LXIII:5

“and the Lord Granted his prayer:” [Since the Hebrew may be translated, “and the Lord let himself be entreated,”] R. Berekiah in the name of R. Levi said, “It may be compared to the prince who was digging to the king to receive a *litra* of gold, and this one dug from inside and that one dug from outside. [God wanted to be entreated.]”

Commenting again on Genesis 25:21, this *midrash* about a king and his son digging for gold illustrates how Isaac looked outward to God by praying, rather than inward towards his wife Rebekah. Perhaps, this is related to the idea in the previous *midrash* where we learned that Rebekah lacked an ovary; her inward physical problems were the cause of her barrenness. If Isaac had looked inward, towards his wife, he may have asked God what was physically wrong with Rebekah. Without the scientific knowledge that we have access to today, it is understandable that Isaac's first response was outward, rather than asking about a physical problem that he had no knowledge about.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXIII:3

"...for the [prayers of] many were with me" (Ps. 55:19): This is in line with what R. Yudan said in the name of R. Aibu, "Rachel was remembered on account of many prayers." It was on account of the merit that applied to her: "Then God remembered Rachel:" [The use of the accusative particle before the name of Rachel, which means to include someone unstated, means that it was an act of remembrance of Rachel] on account of the merit of her sister. "...and God hearkened to her:" on account of the merit of Jacob. "...and opened her womb:" on account of the merit of the foremothers [all of whom prayer for her].

In this *midrash* we learn that God remembered Rachel because of the merit of the many people who prayed for her. The power of prayer is again highlighted, Rachel's sister, Jacob and the foremothers all prayed to God, and God remembered Rachel.

C. God rules based on Justice for those who offer prayers:

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXIII:3

In every passage in which the divinity is called 'God,' it is the divinity in the attribute of justice: 'You shall not curse *God*,' (Ex. 22:7), 'To *God* [meaning, the judges] will come the case of the two of them' (Ex. 22:8). "But it is written, 'And *God* heard their cry and *God* remembered his covenant' (Ex. 2:24). 'And *God* remembered Noah' (Gen. 8:1). 'And *God* remembered Rachel' (Gen. 30:22)."

In this *midrash* we learn that whenever the name God is used in the Bible, it connotes judgment and justice. God remembered Rachel and judged her justly. All of our foremothers experienced a period of barrenness throughout their lives, this *midrash* brings up the subject of judgment from God.

D. God responds to the righteous:

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXIII:4

What was the occasion for the act of remembrance? (God remembered Rachel and opened her womb.) It was the silence that she preserved on her sister's behalf when they gave Jacob Leah. She knew about it but she kept silence. "Then God remembered Rachel:" That was only just, for she brought her co-wife into her house.

Here we see Rachel remembered because she allowed Leah to be given to Jacob as a second wife. Jacob was supposed to marry Rachel, not Leah. This is seen as a just act on Rachel's part for which she is rewarded. Here we see God acting as a judge, remembering those who are righteous.

Midrash Sefer Ha-Aggadah: 53

Elkanah kept bringing up more and more Israelites with him, until all of them began to go up. As a result, the Holy One said to him: Elkanah, you tipped the balance on the scales in Israel's favor and trained them in the observance of the commandments, so that many people earned merit because of you. Therefore I will have a son issue from you who will likewise tip the balance on the scales in Israel's favor and train them in the observance of commandments, so that many will grow in merit through him.

In this *midrash* Elkanah receives a son because of his merit. Here again, God responds to Elkanah because of his righteousness. God judges each individual and rewards him or her for righteous acts. In this *midrash* Hannah's righteousness is not mentioned. How righteous must one be to overcome barrenness? Is it enough for one

parent to be a righteous individual? God's role as a judge brings up many questions for the modern reader.

Midrash Sefer Ha-Aggadah:54

In this *Midrash* God responds to Peninah's taunting of Hannah based on the interpretation that Peninah הרעמה which is commonly translated as "makes her fret" but here is translated as "makes her thunder."

The Holy One said to Peninah, "You make her 'thunder' against Me. As you live, there are no thunders that are not followed by rain. I shall remember her at once.

In this *midrash* God responds to Peninah's taunting of Hannah, by giving Hannah a child. Peninah angered God and disturbed Hannah's relationship with God by telling Hannah that God closed up her womb. Here we see the consequences of righteous and unrighteous behavior. God compares Peninah's taunting to thunder, and God's response to rain. Rain provides sustenance, and therefore Hannah is no longer barren. As we saw with Leah, God responds to the barren woman when she is being treated badly by others.

E. In their homes, barren women are treated badly. God is able to raise them up.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXI:1

"The Lord upholds all that fall and raises up all who are bowed down" (Ps. 145:14): This refers to the barren women, who fall down in their own homes. "...and raises up all who are bowed down" (Ps. 145:14): When the Holy One, blessed be he, remembers them with children, they are able to stand up straight. You may know that this is the case, for lo, Leah was the hated of the household, and once the Holy One blessed be he remembered her with children, she was able to stand up straight: "When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb."

Once again, this *midrash* illustrates the compassion God has for barren women. God opens their wombs when God recognizes they are being treated badly and they have fallen in status within their homes.

F. When God is to blame for Infertility

Midrash Rabbah: Genesis LXIII:5

“because she was barren:” R. Yudan in the name of R. Simeon b. Laqish: “She had no ovary, so the Holy blessed be he, formed an ovary for her.”

In this *midrash* we learn once again that God created Rebekah without an ovary. In her case we recognize that there can be physical problems causing infertility that are not a woman or couple’s fault. She had a physical problem, or in modern times, a medical challenge. God needed to create a new ovary for Rebekah to conceive; Rebekah did not have a decree against her for being unrighteous.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXIII:5

“...and opened her womb:” R. Menahamah in the name of R. Bibi: “Three keys are in the hand of the Holy One, blessed be he, the key for burial, rain, and the womb. “ ‘...the key for burial: ‘Behold I will open your graves’ (Ez. 37:12). “...rain: “The Lord will open to you his good treasure, the heaven, to give rain’ (Deut. 28:12). “...and the womb: ‘and opened her womb.’” Some add, “The key for a good living: ‘You open your hand and satisfy every living thing with favor’ (Ps. 145:16).”

This *midrash* explains that God holds the key to death, sustenance in life and the womb. These three keys open and close the doors of life. If God holds the key to the womb, our biblical couples should not blame them selves for being infertile. This *midrash* may seem to contradict the previous *midrash* which taught us that Rebekah lacked an ovary. In Rebekah’s situation, God provided her with a second ovary, so even in that case, God held the key to her womb.

Conclusion

In this chapter we explored the numerous reasons why our Rabbis believed that our foremothers each experienced barrenness at different points in their lives. Physical

reasons lead to the understanding that no woman or man was at fault and God simply needed to fix the biological problem. Many of the Rabbis discussed prayer and its implications for the infertile woman. God desired women's prayers and through their supplications God heard, remembered and answered their pleas by unlocking our foremothers wombs. Sarai, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah and Hannah understood that in their worlds, if they did not have children they would be perceived negatively and they would not be fulfilling their roles in life. Many of them took their reproductive destinies into their own hands by negotiating with God, indicating to their husbands how together they would solve their barrenness and ultimately, not accepting their lot.

The Rabbis did not always look upon these women as powerful and influential figures, and they often criticized them for the way they acted and the choices they made. But, our foremothers' strength, their desire to communicate with their partners and their ability to support other women who were struggling are all themes that we find in these *midrashim*. These themes, as well as the questions that the *midrashim* bring up for the modern reader will be explored in the final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 3

Contemporary Sources on Infertility

Contemporary psychological research on infertility is a contemporary tool that elucidates the struggles that our biblical ancestors experienced. If Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah and Hannah had been living today, they may have found solace in support groups, couples therapy and in the numerous scholarly books, modern personal accounts and articles written in order to assist individuals coping with infertility. While the Rabbis had a tremendous depth of insight into the human experience, medical professionals and subsequently Jewish professionals today have a greater understanding of the psychological effects of infertility on individuals and couples. In order to remain relevant institutions in the lives of our congregants, the information in this chapter is provided to explain the psychological affects of infertility on individuals and couples today. The psychological experiences highlighted in contemporary literature are then compared and contrasted with the experiences of Sarai, Leah, Rachel, Rebekah and Hannah. The infertile woman's experience today echoes the experiences of our biblical foremothers on various levels allowing the modern reader to gain insight and strength from their lives.

A Woman's Unique Experience

Infertility as Trauma

Modern medical professionals describe infertility as a traumatic experience. "The director of reproductive endocrinology at New York University, Dr. Jamie A Grifio, has stated that infertile couples are "traumatized" and have a "higher rate of depression than

cancer patients.”²⁷ The definition of a trauma encompasses an experience that is not a usual human experience and is physically and/or emotionally overwhelming. Traumatic experiences are often threatening experiences to one’s physical being or that of a loved one. Traumatic experiences encompass one event or a series of events that produce anxiety, depression and difficulty functioning.

In studying our foremothers it is impossible to determine if any of them were traumatized by their situation without speaking directly with them, yet we find many of the symptoms of trauma reflected in their experiences. Rashi comments on Sarai’s experience by explaining that a barren woman is destroyed if she is not built up through her sons. While one could read Rashi’s description as a comment on the fact that the lineage of Sarai and Abram will not exist if she cannot give birth to sons and therefore she is destroyed, Rashi’s description also points to Sarai being destroyed on an emotional level.

Hannah’s response to her infertility by not eating is a clear sign of her psychological distress. Peninah’s taunting created a series of events in Hannah’s life that ultimately resulted in her depression and her inability to function. As Carol McEntyre explains in her article, *Barrenness binds us together*, “Peninah found joy in taunting Hannah. She chided her until Hannah was unable to even eat...Eventually, the pain finally consumed Hannah. She had what I call an “infertility melt-down.”²⁸ Women suffering today from infertility may find their pain reflected in Hannah’s experience.

²⁷ Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family and Social Perspectives(3rd Edition), (Allyn and Bacon: MA, 2005), 259.

²⁸ Carol McEntyre, “Barrenness binds us together.” The Journal of Family and Community Ministries, Baylor University School of Social Work, Reflections, Nov. 2009, 34-35.

Our reproductive capability is a major physical component of our bodies that when functioning improperly, has the ability to diminish one's sense of self and purpose in life. "Infertility is a trauma because it attacks both the physical and emotional sense of self, it presents us with multiple, complicated losses, it affects our most important relationships, and it shifts our sense of belonging in the world."²⁹ One of the reasons why infertility takes such a toll on individuals and couples is that infertile couples are traumatized month after month. A cycle of disappointment places couples on a roller coaster of emotions that ultimately chip away at their emotional resilience. One's identity shifts from being a couple or individual with hopes and dreams of creating a family, to a medical patient questioning every assumption he or she has made about the future. The emotional trauma that a woman and her partner experience is compounded by the physical trauma that occurs every month her menstrual blood reappears.

In Unsung Lullabies, Understanding and Coping with Infertility, the authors explain the many different types of infertility. If a woman becomes pregnant but is not able to carry her fetus full term, she may be considered infertile. A woman who has never been able to carry a fetus full term is considered to be suffering from primary infertility. Women who are able to have a child and later are unable to have more, are labeled as suffering from secondary infertility. Numerous disorders including endometriosis, multiple miscarriages, Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, Ovulatory disorders, uterine factors and in 30% of cases, Male factors, represent the various diagnosis that an individual or couple may face when they search for the cause of their infertility.³⁰ These various categories lead to confusion in understanding one's medical condition and seeking out

²⁹ Jane Jaffe, PH.D., Diamond, Martha Ourieff, PH.D., and Diamond, David J., PH.D., Unsung Lullabies, Understanding and Coping with Infertility, (St. Martin's Press, NY, NY:2005), 5.

³⁰ www.resolve.com

appropriate guidance and medical assistance. One reason infertility is also categorized as a trauma is because the medical interventions needed to treat it affect one's physical and emotional well-being. The various medical labels whittle away at a women's identity, she becomes a medical category rather than a human being.

For our matriarch Sarai, from the moment that we are introduced to her we know that she is barren. This categorization becomes part of her identity, and it affects her so much that she laughs at God when she learns that she will have a son. Infertility is a traumatic experience for a woman and for couples; it changes the way they interact with the world and the way in which they see themselves as individuals and as part of the Jewish community.

Identity Loss

The identity loss that one experiences when unable to have children encompasses the plans that a couple or individual have been developing over the years they have been together and for much of their individual adult lives. The authors of Unsung Lullabies write about these future plans as one's reproductive story. "Your reproductive story is an unconscious narrative that begins in childhood and runs through your adulthood. It is your story of how you think your life as a parent will unfold...That your story isn't unfolding as you hoped it would explains, in part, why infertility is so emotionally painful."³¹ The authors point out that men and women both have reproductive stories and when they are taken away relationships are strained and individuals need time to mourn.

In the biblical chapters explored in Chapter One, the reproductive stories of families and individuals in some cases had to be re-imagined and in other cases were

³¹ Jaffe, 23.

drastically changed. For Sarai and Abram, when they were unable to have children they took matters into their own hands by using a surrogate, Hagar. One can conjecture that Sarai's decision was made in haste and the jealousy that ensued, at its core, represented Sarai's pain and disappointment with her infertility, her new reproduction story was affirmed. Abram and Sarai did not allow themselves much time to process the change in their reproductive story. Their change would forever cause them pain and heartache, even after they found a way to create a family. Later in Genesis when God tells Sarai that she will have a son, Sarai's laughter represents her disbelief that her reproductive story would change once again. Her new reproductive story was affirmed, but her need to mourn was not addressed.

Rebekah expected that she would be able to have children after she fell in love with Isaac. Isaac helped Rebekah reclaim her identity as a mother, and live out their reproductive story together as they prayed for their dreams of having children. Laban had expectations of a reproductive family story for his daughters, Leah and Rachel, before they even met their husband. In biblical times, the oldest daughter was expected to marry first, so when Jacob loved Rachel and not Leah, Laban's expectations were challenged and Rachel and Leah's identities were altered. And finally, Elkanah is unable to understand why Hannah is distraught when she believes her future as a mother is at stake. Elkanah's reproductive story has already been fulfilled, as his other wife, Peninah, gave him many children. When Hannah's sorrow overtakes her, Elkanah's love for her is unable to fill the void that being unable to have children of her own has created in her life. The loss of one's reproductive story includes the loss of hopes and dreams that leave a gaping hole of uncertainty, a hole that a spouse cannot fill.

There are many types of loss that one experiences with infertility. The loss of the physical experience of pregnancy and birth is experienced every time a woman walks by a pregnant woman. Every baby shower, baby naming or *bris* a couple is invited to is a reminder of the celebrations they will not be having. When every woman in a circle of friends or every woman in one's family has children, the loss of a sense of belonging is felt profoundly. We find indications of loneliness and feeling distant from others in *midrashim* about our foremothers. In *Midrash Rabbah* (Genesis LXXI:1) Leah, described as the hated one, is also referred to as a prisoner in her home. She is a prisoner because the Rabbis recognized the shame that infertility caused for our foremothers. When God opens up Leah's womb she is able to leave her house. The loss and loneliness that she experienced was relieved when she became pregnant. Like Leah, women today feel alone while suffering from infertility. Even when friends and family make an effort to sensitively reach out to women and couples who are suffering, it is hard for individuals to feel as though others understand what they are going through.

Many women feel as though they have lost control of their bodies and their lives. They no longer feel healthy as doctors tell them they have something wrong with them. This loss of control can cause a great deal of stress and anxiety for an individual who thrives on being in control of her life.³² In *Midrash Sefer Ha Aggadah* 1 Samuel 1:13, Hannah asks God, "all that you create, is it not created in vain?" Hannah asks God why she has breasts if they will not be used to suckle. This question represents Hannah's awareness that she has lost control of her body. Hannah shares her desire to use her body to nurture a fetus and feed a baby, and she challenges God to help her use her body for its intended purpose.

³² *ibid*, 54.

A woman who is suffering from infertility may feel as though she is no longer competent. She no longer understands what is happening in her body and she does not know what to do to make things work the way they are intended to. Our culture is saturated with ways to take control of your life, and remedies for common and uncommon medical conditions. There is no one remedy to infertility and often doctors have a challenging time pinpointing the one problem for a man or woman suffering together from infertility. The various reasons for infertility, from physical issues to genetics and age are just a few of the categories that doctors need to explore.

Finally, women and men dealing with infertility experience a loss of sexual intimacy and privacy. Couples give themselves to doctors who examine every facet of their sex life in order to identify a solution to their infertility. A couple is told when to be intimate and women are put on hormones that structure their daily interactions with their husbands or partners. Their most intimate moments are dissected and numerous medical tests are ordered that challenge a man's masculinity and a woman's femininity.³³

When individuals experience loss, they often turn to religion for guidance and support. Jewish men and women face tremendous social and cultural expectations that they are unable to fulfill while suffering from infertility. A man's and a woman's Jewish identity is challenged with infertility. Traditionally women in Judaism pass on the Jewish religion to their children and men are both obligated to have children and expected to teach their children about living a Jewish life. In his book, and Hannah wept, Infertility, Adoption, and the Jewish Couple, Michael Gold explains the reality of Jewish law. "In fact, traditional Judaism says that a woman is not obligated to have children...Judaism places greater emphasis on nurturing and raising a child than on giving birth to that

³³ *ibid*, 56.

child.”³⁴ Gold further explains that if a couple is physically unable to have a child, Jewish law considers the couple exempt from childbearing. Today in more liberal communities, the cultural expectation that a young Jewish couple will have children is still prevalent and couples still hold these expectations for themselves. In Hannah’s situation, Elkanah explains to her that he already has children and he does not need Hannah to have a child, but for Hannah, even though she may be technically exempt from having children, her desire remains. Gold’s explanation takes some of the pressure off of a modern couple; but for many, traditional Jewish law does not have a place in their lives. Others, like Hannah, are not ready to give up on their dream. For an individual or couple suffering from infertility, the dream of having a child is coupled with a great deal of loss.

Judaism offers a full tradition to cope with loss: However, as Gold points out, there is no ritual for the loss of a reproductive story. “There is *shiva*, *kaddish*, *yahrzeit*; the community supports us and shares our suffering. But for the loss felt by the infertile couple, there is no tradition...Jewish tradition has no ritual to mark the loss of a dream.”³⁵ For the couple or individual who is suffering from infertility, new rituals to mark the transition from trying to conceive to adopting other alternatives, may provide comfort and support in a Jewish context during a time of frustration and pain. As Jaffe explains, “The psychological space you made to include a baby is empty.”³⁶ The Jewish community has an obligation to support individuals and couples who are coping with this void, and are unable to transition from woman to mother and man to father.

³⁴ Michael Gold, and Hannah wept: Infertility, Adoption and the Jewish Couple, (Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, PA: 1994), 60.

³⁵ *ibid*, 56.

³⁶ Jaffe, 81.

The process of transitioning from a healthy, competent woman with dreams about having a family, to a woman coping with infertility is challenging to say the least. But this process of integrating and acknowledging the changes in one's life is necessary to move forward. Women begin by identifying with their mothers, sisters and friends who have children, and need to go through a process in order to integrate infertility as a part of their identity. A key to this transition includes women coming to identify with other women who have gone through similar challenges; this allows them to no longer feel alone. After Rebekah became pregnant with Esau and Jacob, she felt great pains in her womb. Ibn Ezra explains that she asked other women if their pregnancies were also painful. Rebekah identified with her sisters and she did not want to feel alone in her pain. Our foremothers found support and guidance from their husbands, their sisters and through the stories of their parents and grandparents. Women today also find strength in their communities while they look to those they are in close relationships with for guidance.

**A Woman in her Community: Interpersonal and Communal Relationships while
dealing with Infertility**

Infertility affects individuals, couples, their families and friends in numerous ways. Many relationships are strained and others are strengthened. For couples coping with infertility, learning how to communicate and provide support for one another is imperative for the health of their relationship moving forward. Gaining tools for effective communication is a skill that allows couples to continually strengthen their relationship when they are faced with challenges as well as exciting life transitions. One challenge for couples is that individuals react in different ways, one person may want to talk about the situation while the other prefers not too. Learning what both partners need and finding ways to have those need met either together or from outside relationships, is essential for moving forward.

When faced with infertility, couples that have felt extremely close with one another often find themselves suddenly drifting apart. Couples begin to notice that they are upset with one another, and are unable to explain why. The stress of infertility affects each member of the couple differently, causing individuals to feel as though they don't understand their partner's reactions. "Not only do you each have to deal with the trauma individually, you also must cope with how your partner is coping."³⁷ Psychologists point out that the problems couples experience most likely do not stem from any problem within their relationship, but rather from the stress caused by infertility.³⁸

³⁷ Jaffe, 132.

³⁸ *ibid*, 132.

Sarai and Abram reacted very differently when they were unable to have a child. Sarai took matters into her own hands by offering Hagar, and Abram went along with her recommendation without any discussion. Rashi explains that Rebekah and Isaac reacted by standing together as Isaac prayed; their relationship was strengthened by the fact that they responded together as one. When Rachel desired to have children and insisted that she would die if she could not, Jacob responded in anger. Hannah felt alone, as Elkanah did not understand her intense grief. Every biblical couple responded to their barrenness in a different way, just as couples do today.

Men and women communicate differently as they search for various things from one another including compassion, support and validity. “We argue, resent, judge, and ridicule because the opposite gender does not think, act, or react in a similar fashion. The truth is we do not *instinctively* know how to support each other.”³⁹ Often men communicate their thoughts and beliefs in order to recognize their place in society and rationalize their emotions. Women communicate with the hope of connecting with others and reaching consensus. While couples may agree that their spouse or partner has a valid point of view different from their own, it is more challenging to accept this truth and respond to each other emotionally. God scolded Jacob in *Midrash Rabbah* Genesis LXXI:7 when God asked, “Is this the proper way to answer women in distress?” Jacob may have understood Rachel’s disappointment and sorrow, but his response was based on his own reaction rather than her emotions.

Judaism values the spousal relationship as one for companionship and friendship as much as a partnership for procreation. “In the *Sheva Brachot* (seven blessings) recited

³⁹, Ferguson, Harriette Rovner and Peoples, Debby , C.S.W., What to Expect When You’re Experiencing Infertility, How to Cope with the Emotional Crisis and Survive., (W.W. Norton & Company, NY and London: 1998), 42..

under the *huppah*, husband and wife are called *reim ahuvim* (loving friends). They must be more than lovers...a husband and wife must be able to talk with one another and communicate openly about infertility or any other problem.”⁴⁰ Rebekah and Jacob are often the biblical couple that scholars comment on as the true love story in the bible. *Midrash* teaches us that Rachel and Jacob communicated with one another in a way that is a model for couples today. In *Midrash Rabbah* Genesis LXXI:7 Rebekah and Jacob looked to their parents and grandparents as examples for how they should work together as a couple. Rachel uses Isaac and Rebekah, as well as Sarai and Abram as examples for what Jacob and Rachel could do to have children. Jacob was able to see himself in his father and grandfather, and when Rachel gave him permission to have a child with her maid Bilhah, Jacob understood that his grandfather Abram had children for Sarai in the same way. In Rachel and Jacob’s situation, communication and understanding were key in order for their relationship to remain strong.

In the case of Hannah and Elkanah, it is unclear if Elkanah truly understands Hannah’s experience. What is clear is that he cares deeply about her and he notices her pain. Elkanah asks Hannah why she is crying and not eating, he is concerned about her health as well as her tears. No individual is able to completely understand what a partner or friend is feeling, but a couple’s willingness to show concern and care for each other while trying to understand what the other person is feeling is essential during times of stress and suffering. Marcia Hochman, a woman who struggled with infertility, writes about the support she received from her husband. “I came to know more deeply than ever before that were it not for the solid and loving support and tenderness of my husband, I would never get through anything. I came to feel deeply in ways I had never experienced

⁴⁰ Gold, 61.

before someone else's pain and anguish at not being able to get what one so dearly wants."⁴¹ When couples look to one another for support they often find it, but sometimes an individual is unable to move beyond their desire to blame someone or something else for their situation and other times they are unable to move beyond their own feelings of guilt.

Jacob becomes upset when he believes Rachel is blaming him for her infertility. Jacob responds by blaming God, Jacob says, "Am I in place of God who has withheld you from the fruit of the womb?" Michael Gold explains the problem with blame and finding fault in the case of infertility. "The word *fault* implies a moral culpability. Infertility has a physical cause, not a moral cause. Infertility is a time for communication and mutual support, not for castigation and blame."⁴² Gold's point is clear, but it was tough for our biblical couples to not look for someone to blame, and it is just as challenging for modern couples.

For many women, talking with other women is as important as communicating with their partners. The love triangle that created a rivalry between Rachel and Leah in Genesis 29 exemplifies the ways in which women feel both able and unable to communicate with each other while they suffer from infertility. At times the women competed with one another for Jacob's attention, and as they had children they seemed to be in a race. By the end of the portion, *Vayetzai*, they left their father with Jacob, living together peacefully.

Infertility is isolating, especially when everyone around you is having children, but women can also find inspiration from one another if they search for it. At times

⁴¹ Marcia Hochman, "Has Hannah Stopped Crying?" Union for Reform Judaism, Study Guide XI Infertility and Assisted Reproduction, Autumn 1999.

⁴² Gold, 61.

Rachel felt alone while Leah gave birth to her sons, and eventually God remembered Rachel as well, and her womb was opened. Social Workers explain how it is challenging for infertile women to interact with those who have not struggled with infertility. “It is not as if you want to separate from those around you; in fact you want to be right in there with them, a part of the fertility club...it becomes harder to be around those who now seem to disappoint you at every turn with their inaccurate medical advice, offhand remarks, and insensitive responses to your grief. Their comments, all well intended, serve to increase your already intense feelings of anger, disappointment, sadness, and especially envy.”⁴³ Interpersonal relationships, even with one’s closest friends become challenging. Women struggling are encouraged to seek out support from mental health professionals and other women who are dealing with infertility.

Support groups offer women and couples an environment where they can feel less isolated from society. RESOLVE, the National Infertility Association explains the benefits of joining a support group. The support group experience provides individuals with: a decrease in their sense of isolation; a place where they are free to express their negative emotions; an atmosphere where they are able to develop effective coping skills; and an opportunity to increase one’s level of self esteem. If Hannah had been able to speak with other women also struggling with barrenness, she may have not been as traumatized by Peninah’s taunting. In *Midrash Rabbah* Genesis LXXII:VI, the Rabbis teach us that our foremothers prayed for Rachel to have a son. The women supported Rachel and they prayed for her. A support group can provide a place for women to talk to one another and also pray with and for each other.

⁴³ Ferguson, 52.

In our modern world where technology connects us with each other in more ways than we have ever imagined, we simultaneously feel a greater sense of loneliness as we interact face to face with one another less frequently. For a woman or couple suffering from infertility, there are numerous ways to connect with others who are struggling to create a family.

God's Role in the Contemporary Woman's Struggle

Theological questions arise for many couples and individuals dealing with infertility. Many have questions for and about God's role in their struggle. An individual may choose to turn to religion and in other cases they may stay far away from our synagogues. Who holds the key to the womb? In the Rabbinic mind God holds the key to the womb, opening and closing it at God's discretion. There was only one answer to that question throughout much of history, but today doctors, communities, individuals and God all offer the modern woman a different path to answer that question. In a way, psychologists, groups, medical professionals and clergy each hold a different key for each woman willing to explore these unique disciplines.

In the Torah, ultimately one's faith in God depended on his or her faith in themselves. Hannah, Rachel, Rebekah and Leah all believed in the power of their prayers, and Sarai had faith in her solution to create a family. Today, modern psychologists believe that women need to have faith in themselves. "The best way to survive this period of wavering faith is to *believe in your own truth*. This means listening to that part of you that tells you what is right for you, not what is right for your partners,

your spouse, your friends, or anyone else.”⁴⁴ Believing in one’s own truth is difficult when one’s plan in life is challenged by infertility.

Sarai laughs at God; Hagar finds God in the wilderness; and after pouring out her heart to God, God remembers Leah. Jacob communicates with God on behalf of Rebekah and Hannah prays to and negotiates with God in order to conceive and give birth to Samuel. God takes on varying levels of importance for our foremothers as they all communicate with God in different ways. God’s role in the modern woman’s life today is also different for every woman. In an article, Carol McEntyre explained how barrenness led her to test her trust in God. “Do I require a God that I can fully understand, or will I trust in a God who is mystery mixed with flashes of clarity? Do I require a God that I can control, or am I willing to trust in a God who can never be manipulated?”⁴⁵ These questions are universal for women and men who are struggling with infertility, as well as other life challenges. Our foremothers all communicated with God and eventually they were given what they desired. They knew that God played an important role in their lives and therefore they looked to God for answers as they struggled with infertility. A woman’s previous experiences with religion may influence her decision to look to Judaism and God, or to choose to look elsewhere for support and guidance.

Our foremothers cried out to God in order to be heard--they did not always receive the answer they were searching for, but they often felt as though God had listened and remembered them. Hannah offered her unborn son to God, but we don’t know if she really wanted God to take her up on her offer. Sarai laughed when God told Abram that she would be having a son; she did not expect God to answer her prayers so late in her

⁴⁴ Ferguson, 134.

⁴⁵ McEntyre, 35.

life. Women today cry, pray and laugh throughout their experiences with infertility as well. They seek out God at different times throughout their journeys with infertility; sometimes they feel heard and other times they find God's silence infuriating.

Depending on one's previous relationship with God and one's own theology, prayer can transform one's life in multiple ways. "Prayer is not something we do to change God; it is something we do to transform ourselves. Our prayers are meant to give us strength to cope, even if our circumstances remain unchanged. If we pray to God to grant us children, our prayers may not automatically open our wombs. Ideally, they will give us the strength to persist and pursue all the options open to us and to accept our situation, whatever it may be."⁴⁶ This statement by Michael Gold may resonate for liberal Jews but for those who believe prayers should be taken more literally, accepting his interpretation of the outcome of prayers is harder. Judaism teaches that God is just, but infertility does not feel fair to those individuals and couples who are struggling with it. The struggle that our foremothers experienced with God is interpreted by many as a test of their faith, yet through their struggles they each found themselves closer to God. The modern woman who feels cheated by her body and by God, may find a reinterpretation of our matriarch's experiences helpful as a source of strength in her own struggle.

In her article, *The Myth of Birthing the Hero: Heroic Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible*, Rachel Havrelock explains that the way in which our foremothers interacted with God represented a movement from barrenness to fertility as a mode of female initiation into a relationship with the divine. The covenant between God and Israel, she explains, that is initiated by God with Abraham and his descendants, does not come into fruition

⁴⁶ Gold, 70.

until a female covenant, through fertility, is forged.⁴⁷ For Hannah, spontaneous prayer with God was the only way that she could receive the son that she wished for. By boldly asserting herself to show Eli that her way of getting God's attention was the only way in which she would forge a relationship with God, Hannah received a blessing from Eli and soon became a mother. "For those who do become mothers, the movement from barrenness to fertility depends on articulation, assertion and action as well as a heroic daring long remembered in the names they leave behind."⁴⁸ Rather than interpreting our foremothers as women who simply prayed and were given what they asked for, or as women who were being punished but who were eventually remembered favorably by God, Havrelock recognizes the roles that these women took in the history of the Jewish people.

Contemporary biblical scholars have transformed our foremothers' stories into prayers for the modern woman coping with infertility. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, in her book Motheprayer, The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion, researched the many Jewish and Christian traditions relating to pregnancy and childbirth. Through her research she recognized women's desires for mindful practices surrounding pregnancy and birth rather than only medical ones, and she crafted a number of prayers based on texts and cultural themes. One of her prayers entitled, *The Key*, recognizes a Rabbinic theme that God holds the key to a woman's womb.

Once, while Rachel waited
God opened Leah's womb.

⁴⁷ Rachel Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero: Heroic Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible", *Journal of Biblical Interpretation*, 16 (2008) 154-178.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 178.

Still, while Rachel waited,
 Ten sons were born to Jacob.
 Other people have children,
 Other women conceive,
 Rachel waited
 And we wait still.
 We wait and search;
 Are there mandrakes for us?

It is time for the key of birthing.
 Bring it to us
 To undo the lock.
 Hear our prayer,
 Open my womb,
 For life.⁴⁹

These modern prayers based on traditional themes provide the contemporary woman with a vehicle to express her timeless yearnings with the same God who listened and remembered our foremothers. This prayer, and many other artistic expressions, provide the modern woman with tools to creatively express her emotions, and find her voice amidst a great deal of pain.

Jewish women today may not find solace in our foremothers' experiences by simply reading their stories without looking deeper. When we study their actions, and realize how much strength it must have taken Sarai, Rachel, Leah, Rebekah and Hannah to find their voice amidst their pain, assert themselves and protest their given situations, we recognize they encountered God in a direct and powerful way. They can inspire women today to find the strength to keep fighting their lot in life and explore their relationship with God through prayer, negotiations, and determination.

⁴⁹ Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, Motherprayer, The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion, (New York, Berkley Publishing Group) 1995, pg. 22

Conclusion

How our Texts Have the Power to Heal

This thesis explored the many ways in which our tradition interpreted the experience of barrenness for Sarai, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah and Hannah. Biblical commentators studied Genesis and Samuel in-depth to understand how our foremothers and forefathers interacted with one another. They analyzed every word within the text and hypothesized on the ways in which the experience of barrenness transformed relationships between couples, communities of women and individuals relationships with God. Modern scholars have taken the next step by using our biblical stories as texts that have the power to change our lives. By studying our foremothers' experiences of barrenness with an eye towards our own lives, and finding our lives mirrored in the experiences of our foremothers, we are able to learn, grow and find comfort from women who lived generations before us.

Today, our biblical stories, Rabbinic commentary and *midrashim* can be studied in numerous ways in order to highlight their relevance for modern day women and couples struggling with infertility. It is important to prepare the learners for the multiple reactions that they may have to these texts. At first glance the story of Hannah is simply an example of a woman who prayed and received what she asked for from God. A woman struggling with infertility, who has lost her faith in God may not find Hannah's story helpful. But when she studies Hannah in light of Havrelock's article describing the heroic and assertive actions that Hannah and all of the foremothers took in order to engage in a relationship with God, she may be able to find hope in Hannah's experience.

Every year on Rosh Hashanah we read about infertility. Whether it is the community's tradition to read about the birth of Isaac or Samuel, barrenness is a topic that is highlighted on the one day of the year that a majority of Jews in the United States attend synagogue. The way in which clergy choose to preach about this topic has the potential to transform individual's relationships with the Jewish community. For a couple who is struggling to conceive, to hear their rabbi talk about infertility in a sensitive way may give that couple permission to talk to their rabbi about their struggle. Teaching about Hannah's prayer by offering modern prayers for individuals to use provides congregants with an invitation to speak to God in their own words. Ritualwell.org offers a *Tashlich* ritual for a couple that is looking for a way to move forward and metaphorically rid themselves of unrealized expectations.

Jewish support groups for couples and women may begin with a story from Genesis in order to spark conversation about the theological questions that our foremothers struggled with, and the questions that infertility evokes today. Rosh Hodesh groups may find prayers to offer one another and say together from modern women who have crafted new liturgy for this grueling life experience. Just as a woman's menstrual cycle takes its course, Rosh Hodesh groups arrive monthly to honor the new moon.

Our foremothers' struggles will evoke emotionally responses from those who find their lives depicted in their stories. It is the rabbi, educator, cantor or group facilitator's job to ensure that individuals and groups studying these stories also find hope and strength, and above all resilience from their experiences learning together and supporting one another. Our texts place our modern struggles into a historical context, allowing individuals to feel apart of a community of women and couples who have struggled

together over thousands of years. Our presence in the lives of our congregants is what will ultimately pull them out of their misery and help them find meaning and purpose, after their hopes and dreams of creating a biological family have been challenged or stolen from them.

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http://www.jccany.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ametz_meetingtheneedsofjewishadoptivefamilies

http://www.ncjwny.org/services_plsp.htm

<http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/17042.pdf>

<http://www.resolve.org/diagnosis-management/infertility-diagnosis/>

<http://sistersinstrength.wordpress.com/resources/booksandarticles/>

*This thesis was formatted using Microsoft Word version 1997-2004. If opening up this document in a newer version the Hebrew words may appear incorrect.

One page summary:

This thesis consists of a brief introduction, three chapters and a brief conclusion. This thesis examines a variety of sources in order to understand the ways in which our foremothers struggled with infertility while shedding light on how their lives mirror the lives of women today. Throughout Jewish history, including today, Jews have viewed having children as a given and barrenness as the anomaly, despite the fact that every one of our foremothers struggled with being barren at some point in her life. This thesis begins with the biblical stories and commentators. It continues by examining *midrashic* sources and contemporary literature concerning infertility. It concludes by offering suggestions for ways in which to use these sources in counseling sessions, support groups, sermons and adult learning classes.

The goal of this thesis is to uncover useful texts for modern individuals and couples who are struggling with infertility. In order for Jewish institutions to remain relevant in the lives of our congregants, clergy must be able to respond to modern issues that their congregants are struggling with. Infertility is an increasing problem for the Jewish community and our tradition has a great deal to say about it.

Modern psychological literature on the emotional effects of infertility, as well as biblical stories, rabbinic *midrash* and biblical commentaries were all studied for this thesis. Relevant commentary and *midrash* were examined in light of the time periods they were created in, and many of the issues raised in these traditional texts were found to be useful tools to study with congregants struggling with infertility today.